



# Cook Islands Visitor Survey Results

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**July - September 2015**

**Prepared for Cook Islands Tourism Corporation**

**by**

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Auckland University of Technology**

[www.nztri.org](http://www.nztri.org)

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## Executive Summary

This report focuses on the characteristics, expectations and expenditure patterns of tourists who visited the Cook Islands. The data presented is drawn from an online departure survey (<http://www.mycookislandsvisit.com>). The survey period covered in this report is 1 July to 30 September 2015. There were 788 individual respondents to the survey - representing a total of 1647 adults and 261 children (this equates to 5% of all visitors during the period – based on the 2014 visitor arrival data for the April to June period from the Cook Islands Statistics Office).

The majority (70%) of visitors surveyed come from New Zealand, 18% come from Australia. Visitors are well educated (69% of visitors have some form of tertiary education) with a relatively high annual household income (44% earn over NZ\$100,000 per year). Just under half of the visitors (42%) travel with one companion. Solo travellers are relatively rare (5%).

Nearly two thirds of the visitors surveyed (60%) are first time visitors to the Cook Islands, a further 23% have visited once or twice before. The main purpose of the visit is holiday-making (77%). The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is 8.5 nights. The majority (95%) of the visitors stay either one or two weeks. Twenty three percent of the visitors surveyed visit Aitutaki in addition to Rarotonga.

Visitor spend prior to arrival in the Cook Islands (\$2,173 per person) has increased from the 2014/15 annual average (\$2,000 per person). Spend on the island (per person per day) is \$152 which is higher than the 2014/15 annual average of \$112, and higher than the same quarter for the previous year (\$108 for July to September 2014).

The average local spend per visitor during the whole trip is \$1,292. If the pre-paid spend amount and the local spend are combined, it is estimated that each visitor brings \$2,161 to the Cook Islands economy (or approximately \$254 per day). This figure is higher than \$1,756 average for 2014/15, and higher than \$1,765 for the same quarter last year (July to September 2014).

Water-based activities are characterised by the strongest participation levels. Visitor satisfaction levels with activities and services are high. Cultural interactions and water based activities are characterised by the highest overall satisfaction ratings. The most appealing elements of the Cook Islands experience are the beautiful natural environment, the friendly local people, the activities and attractions on offer, the peacefulness and relaxing atmosphere of the islands, and entertainment and events. The least appealing elements of the Cook Islands experience are considered to be the lack of public services and facilities, the poor quality and value for money in terms of food and beverage, and environmental issues.

Overall satisfaction on the part of visitors is very high: 94% of those surveyed want to return to the Cook Islands, and 99% would recommend the Cook Islands to friends or family. The overall satisfaction level is consistent with the previous year.

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## Introduction

The Cook Islands government, local businesses and communities require a clearer picture of the characteristics, expectations and expenditure patterns of visitors to the nation. This information is needed to enable the effective planning and development of the tourism industry and to highlight its crucial role within the broader Cook Island's economy. Visitors to the Cook Islands are asked to complete a web-based survey within two weeks of the completion of their visit. This web-based survey ran for 36 months during 2012-2015 with reporting on a quarterly and annual basis, and is continuing through 2015-2016.

This report presents the results from July to September 2015. Over this three month period, 2,171 visitors were contacted by email to take part in the survey, and 788 responses were received: a conversion rate of 36.3%. These responses cover a total of 1,647 adults and 261 children. The conversion rate for this period is higher than for the 2014/15 annual average (28%) and July to September 2014 quarter (29%).

The data presented includes detailed information on:

- The characteristics of visitors to the Cook Islands (age, gender, education, country of origin, income, purpose of visit, travelling companions, number of previous visits, length of stay, airline used, islands visited)
- Visitor expenditure (amount of money spent prior to arrival and while in the Cook Islands, items of spending)
- Visitor satisfaction (most and least appealing elements of the visit, overall satisfaction, satisfaction with activities)

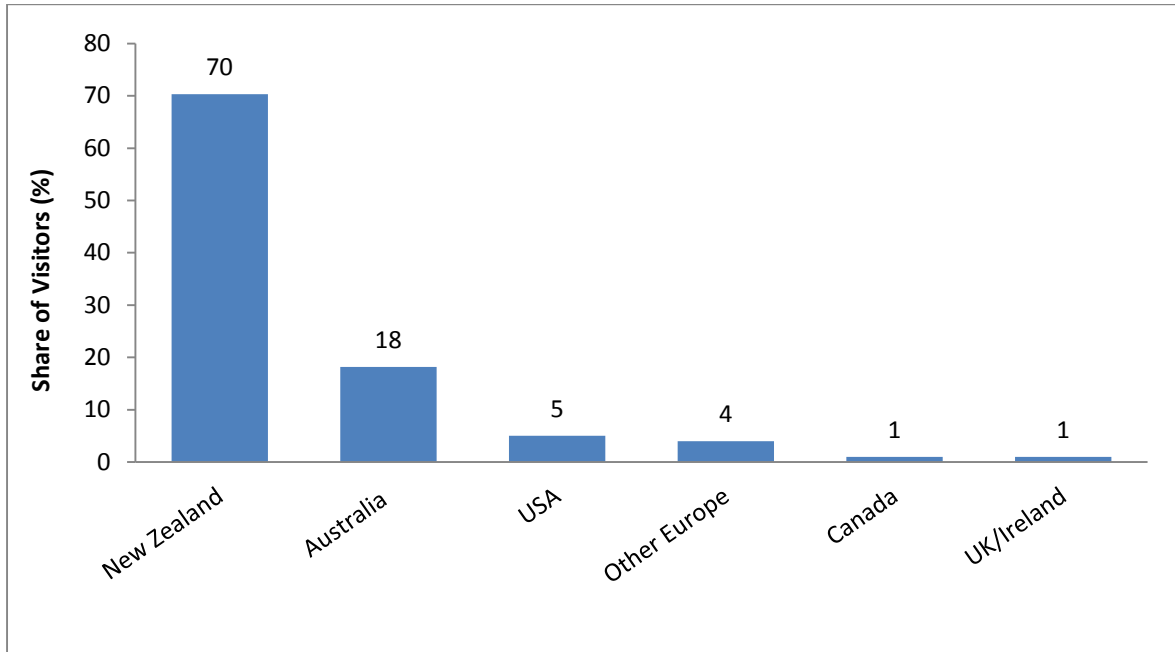
Wherever there are significant and/or notable variations from the 2014/15 annual averages or the 2014/15 July – September quarterly figures these are highlighted in the discussion below.

The report also includes for the first time an analysis of the impacts associated with Te Maeva Nui 2015 (50<sup>th</sup> constitution celebrations) with a focus on activities attended, expenditure, and overall satisfaction with the event.

## Visitor Characteristics

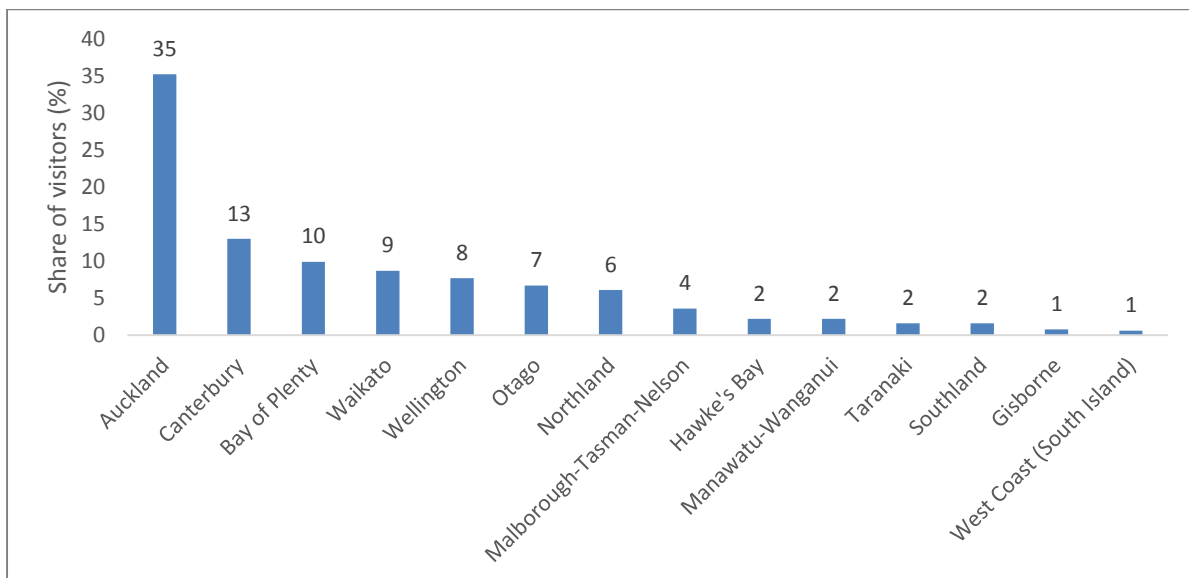
The majority (70%) of the visitors surveyed come from New Zealand (Figure 1). The second largest visitor group is from Australia, with 18% of respondents. Europe, USA, Canada and Great Britain represent the other main source markets.

**Figure 1: Country of origin (n=704)**



Auckland, Canterbury, Bay of Plenty, and Waikato account for 67% of the New Zealand visitors. For visitors from Australia, the regions of New Wales, Victoria, and Queensland generate the largest numbers of visitor arrivals (91%) (Figure 2-3).

**Figure 2: New Zealand visitors (n=494)**

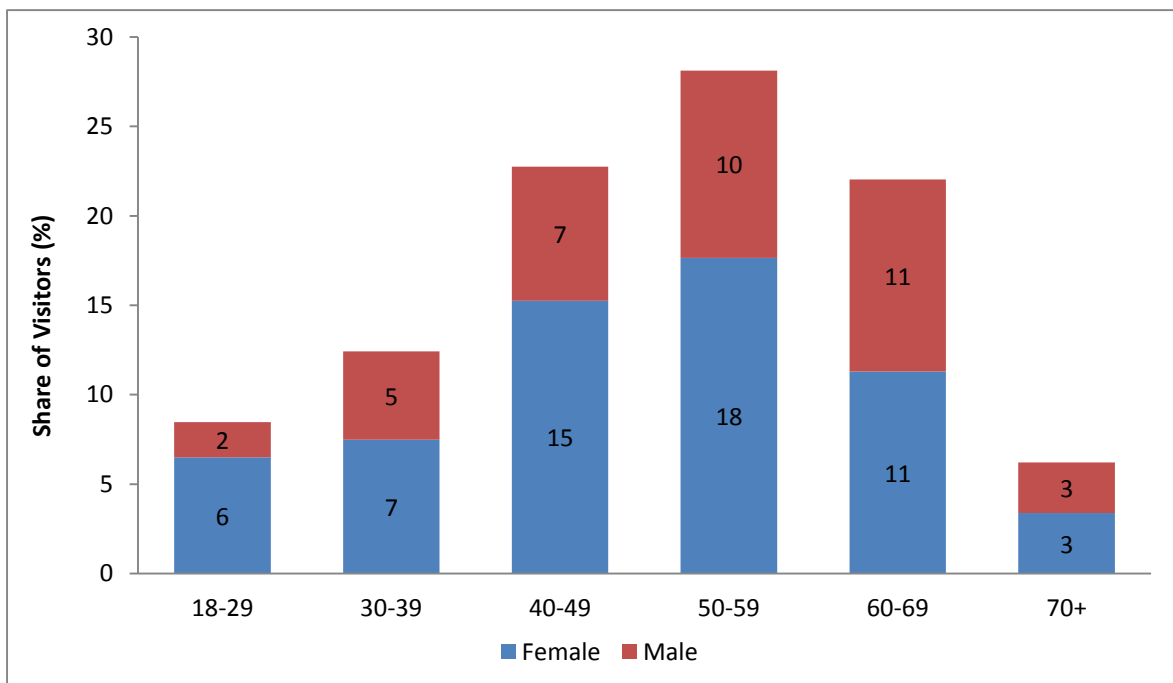


**Figure 3: Australia visitors (n=126)**



More women (62%) than men (38%) completed the survey (Figure 4). The most significant age group categories are the 50 to 59 year olds (28%) grouping, followed by those aged 40 to 49 (22%) and 60 to 69 age group (22%). There are relatively few travellers in the 70 plus age bracket.

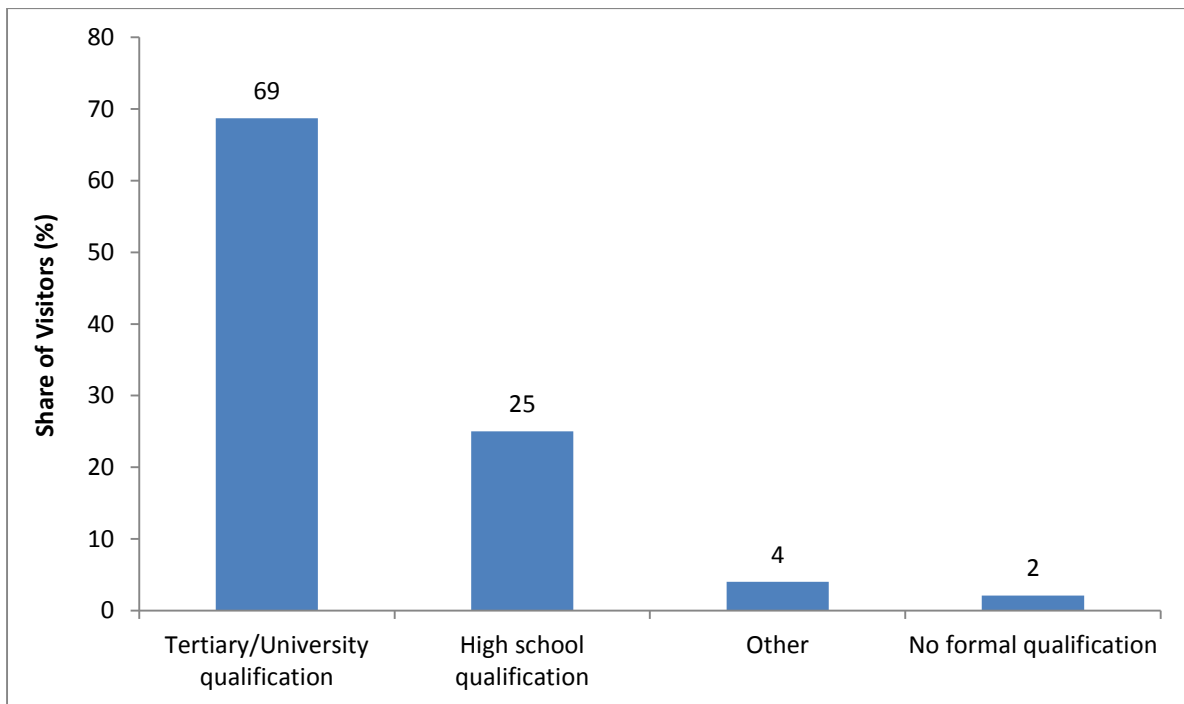
**Figure 4: Distribution of age and gender (n=708)**



Visitors are well educated: more than two-thirds (69%) of those surveyed have some form of tertiary qualification, with a further 25% having completed a high school education (Figure 5).

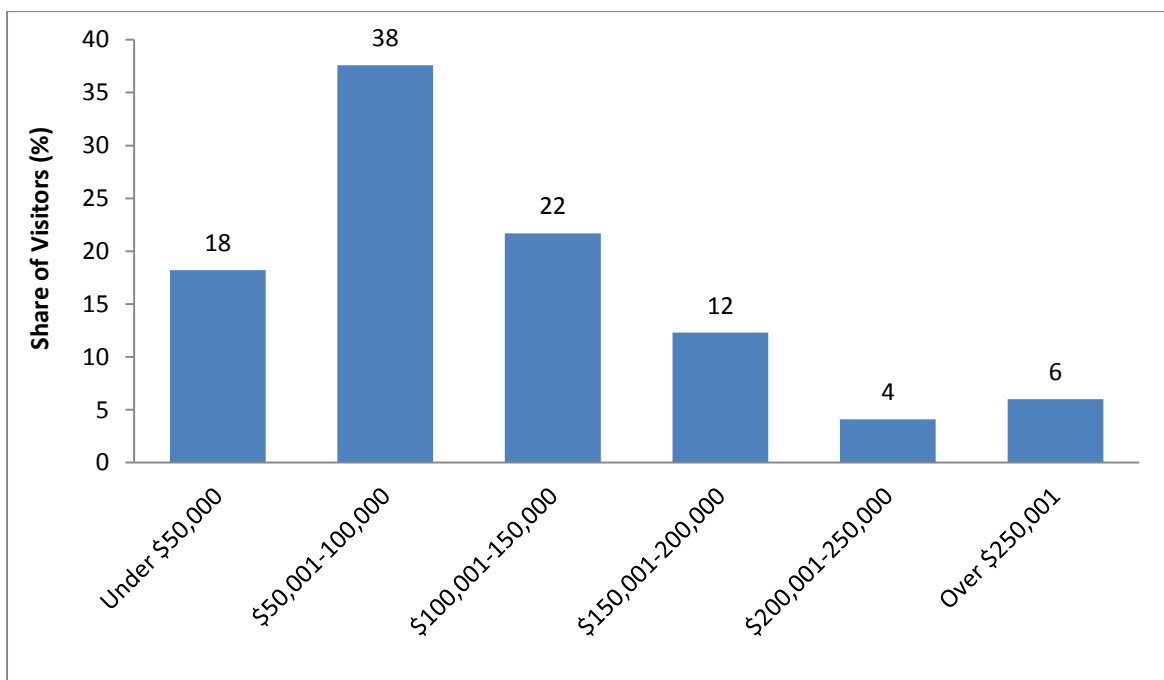


**Figure 5: Highest qualification (n=707)**



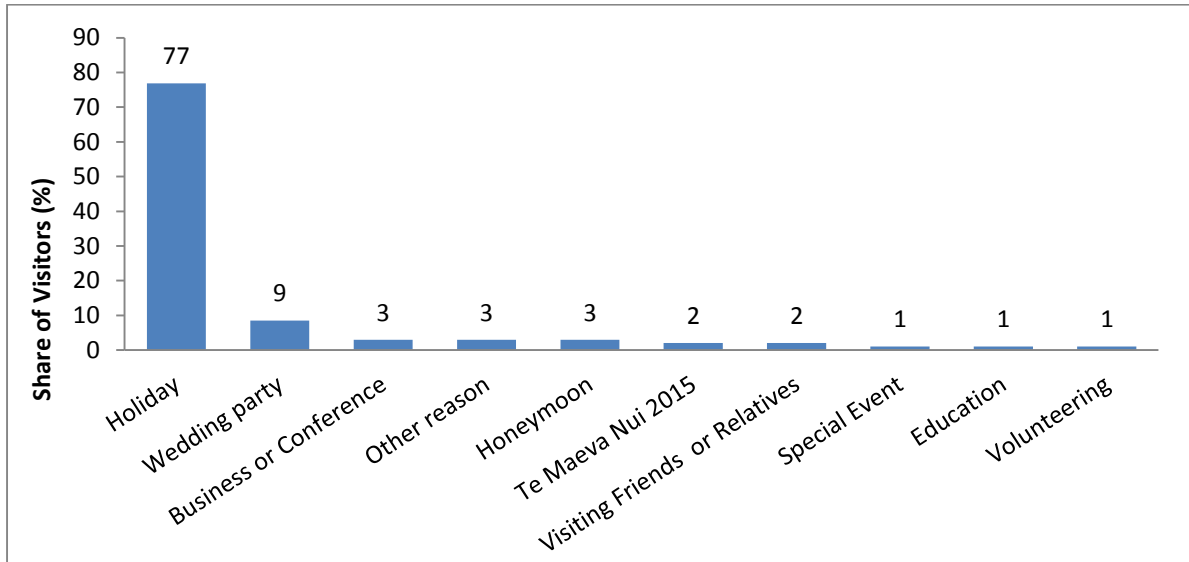
Over a third of visitors (38%) have an annual household income of between NZ\$50,001 and NZ\$100,000. Nearly a quarter (22%) of those surveyed earn between NZ\$100,001 and NZ\$150,000. A further 22% of respondents have a household income of over NZ\$150,000 per year (Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Annual household income in NZD (n=603)**



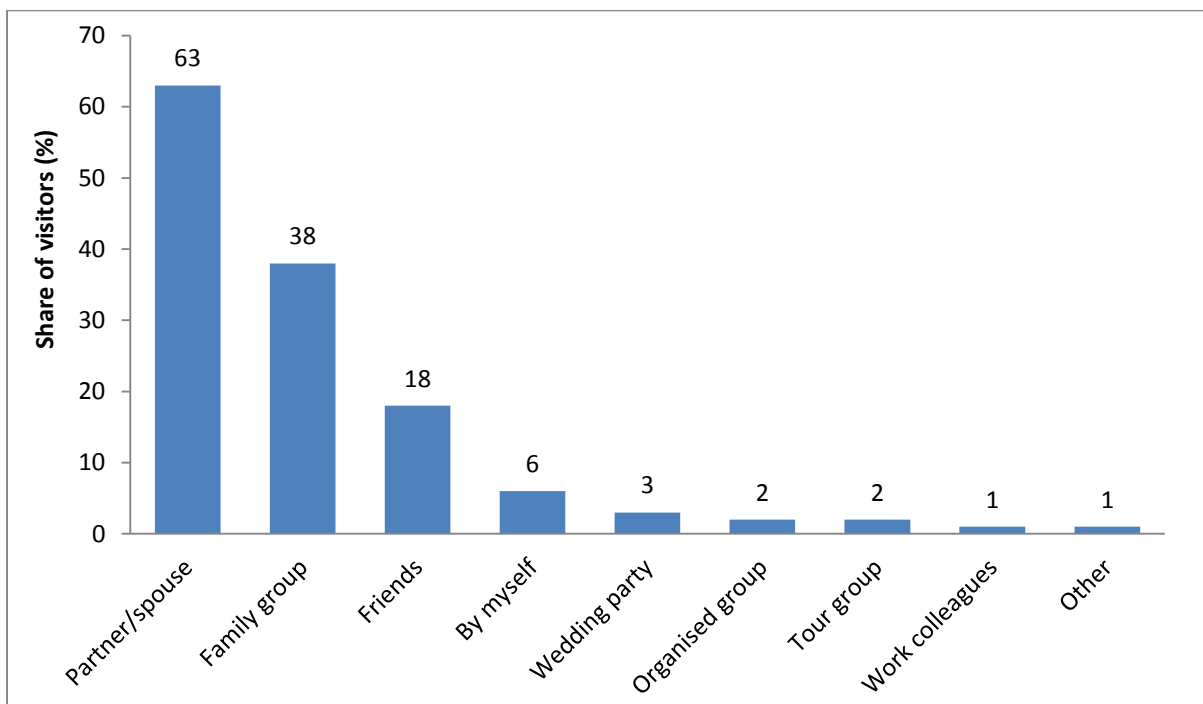
Over three quarters of visitors surveyed come to the Cook Islands for a holiday (77%). Other reasons given include to attend a wedding (9%), for business and conference (3%), and for a honeymoon (3%). Just 2% of survey respondents came to the Cook Islands particularly for Te Maeva Nui 2015 during this quarter (Figure 7).

**Figure 7: Main purpose of visit (n=788)**



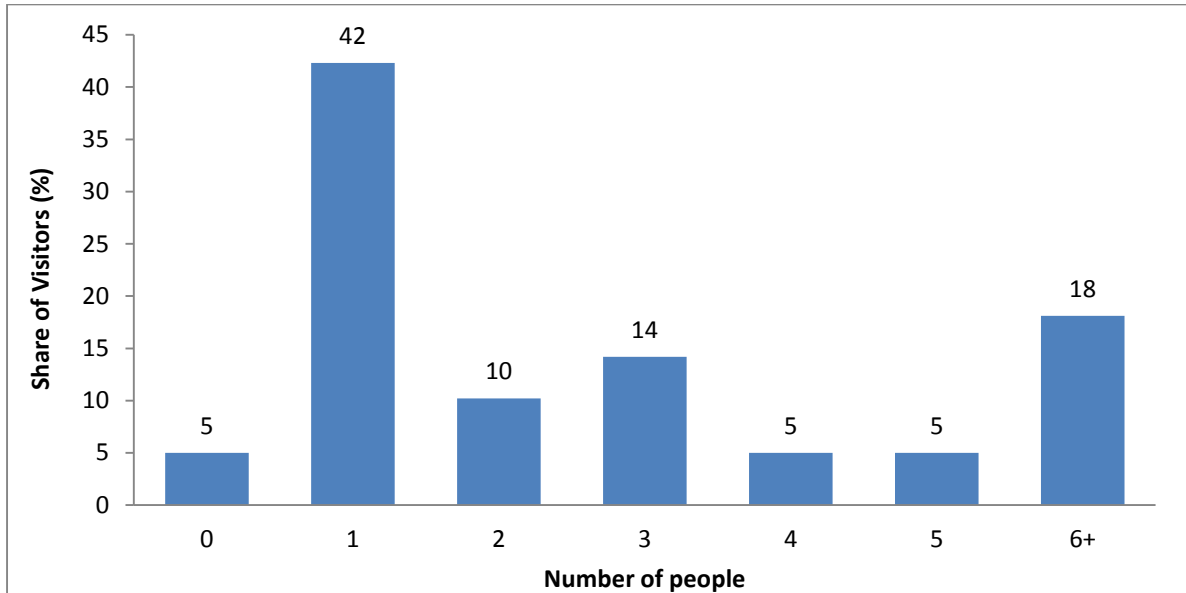
Most visitors (63%) surveyed travel to the Cook Islands with a partner or spouse. Visitors also often travel with other family members (38%) or friends (18%). Those travelling alone, or as a part of a wedding party or organised group represent a smaller share of the sample (Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Travelling with whom? (n=786)**



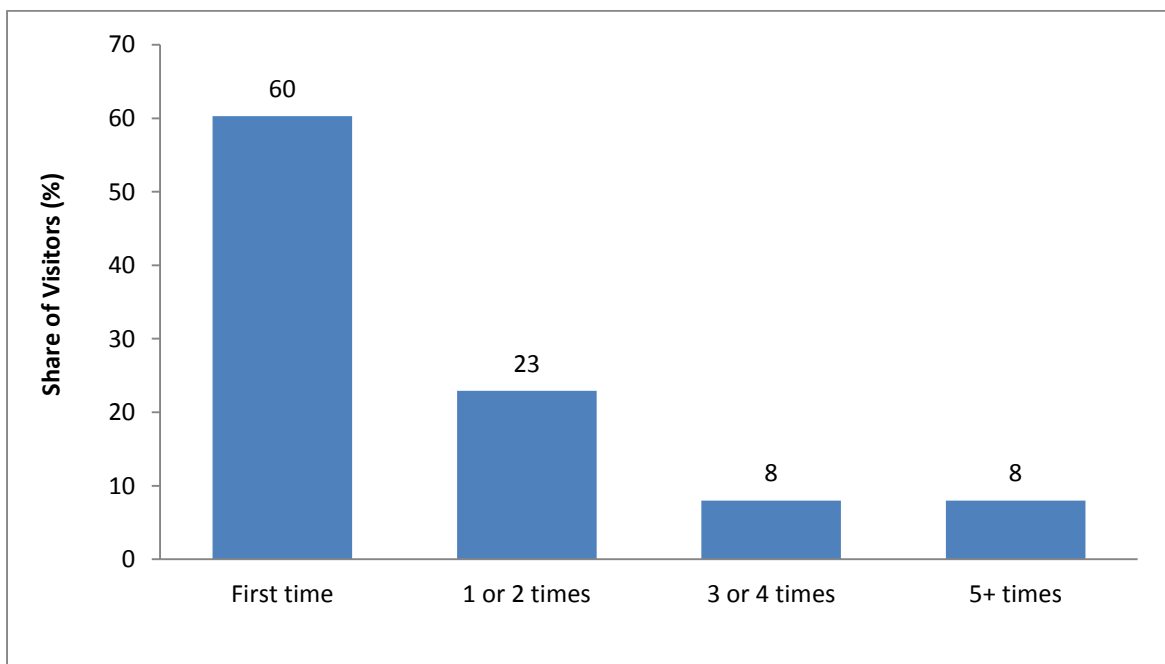
Just under half of the visitors (42%) travelled with one companion on their visit to the Cook Islands (Figure 9). Travel groups larger than 4 people were not very common, with the exception of wedding parties.

**Figure 9: Number of companions on trip (n=775)**



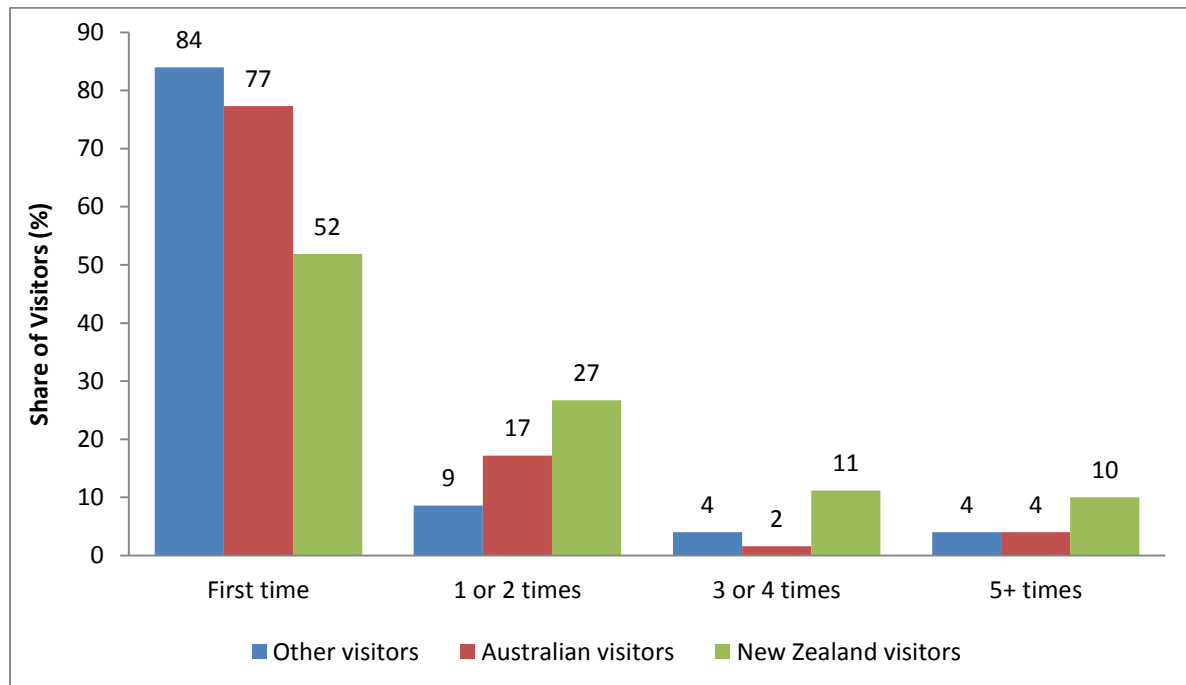
Just under two thirds of the visitors (60%) are on their first visit to the Cook Islands. A further 23% have been to the Cook Islands once or twice before. A smaller group (16%) have visited three or more times (Figure 10).

**Figure 10: Number of visits to the Cook Islands (n=707)**



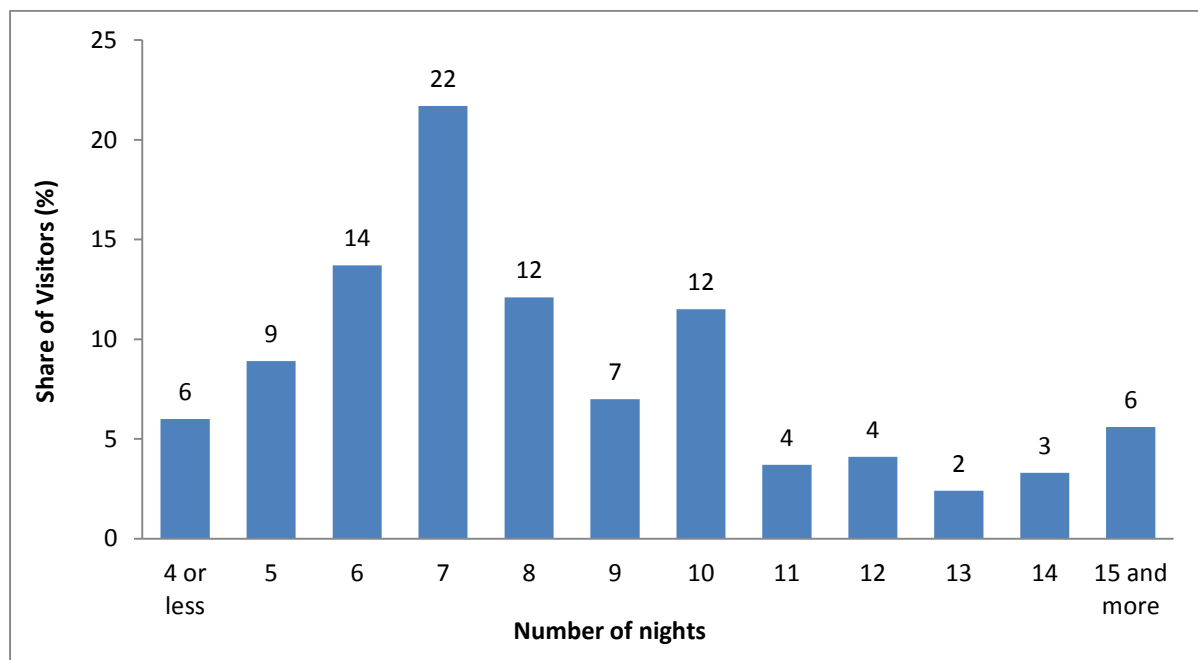
New Zealanders are more likely to be repeat visitors than those from other source markets (Figure 11). Nearly half of visitors from New Zealand (48%) have visited the Cook Islands before compared to only 23% of visitors from Australia.

**Figure 11: Number of previous visits to the Cook Islands – country breakdown**



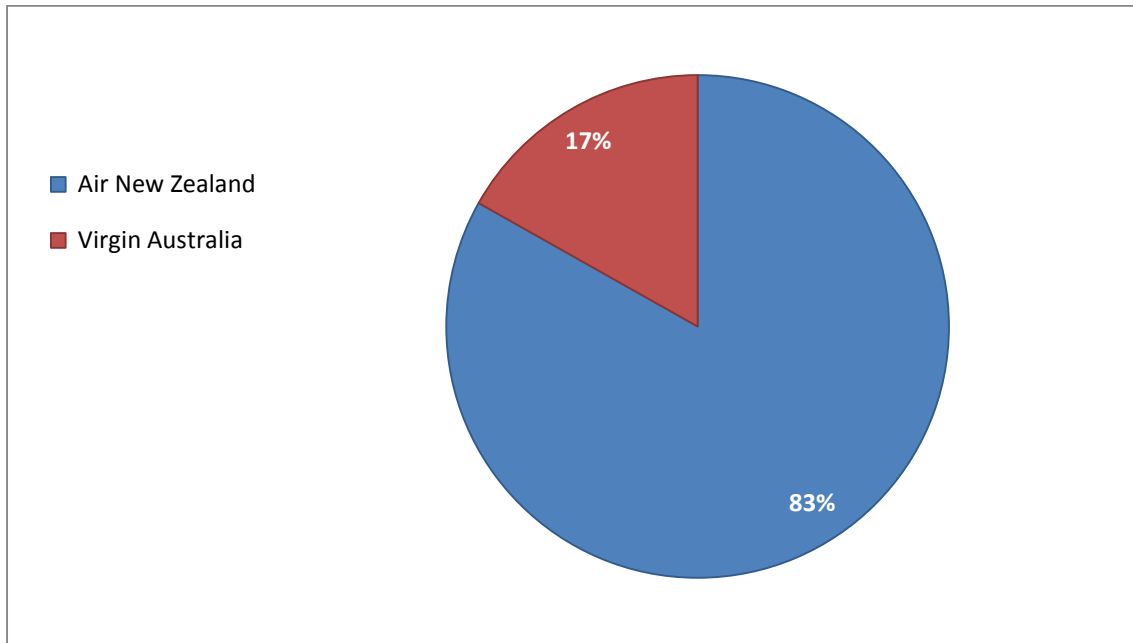
The average length of stay in the Cook Islands is 8.5 nights with 82% of visitors spending 10 or fewer nights in the country (Figure 12).

**Figure 12: Length of stay in nights (n=783)**



The majority of visitors (83%) travel to/from the Cook Islands with Air New Zealand, a further 17% visitors fly with Virgin Australia (Figure 13). Less than 1% of visitors travel with Air Tahiti Nui, or arrive by private vessel.

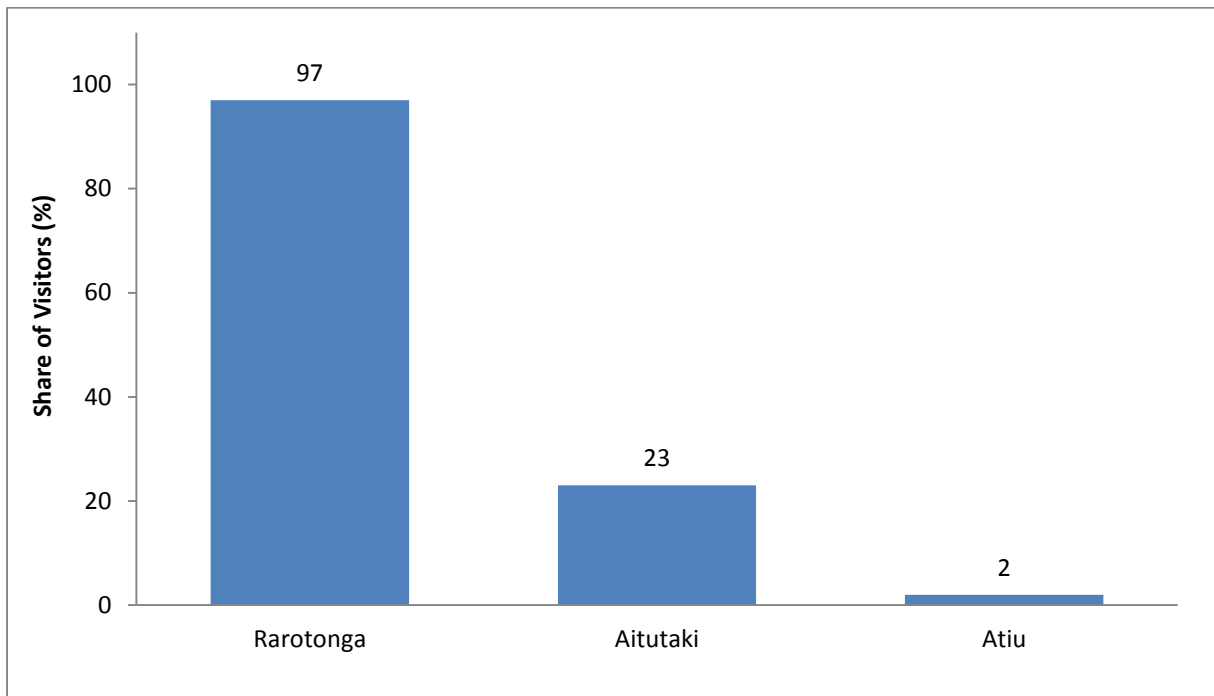
**Figure 13: Mode of transport (n=780)**



For 90% of visitors, the Cook Islands is the sole destination for their trip. For 10% of the visitors surveyed during the July to September 2015 period the Cook Islands is part of a larger journey, including some visitors who are on an around-the-world trip. For those travelling to other countries as part of their recent trip, the top destination mentioned was New Zealand (49%), followed by travel to North America (31%), Asian countries (22%), Australia (18%), and other pacific countries (13%).

The vast majority (97%) of visitors to the Cook Islands spend time on Rarotonga, with Aitutaki being the second most visited island (23%) (Figure 14). Other islands are rarely featured in the survey responses, with Atiu for example only receiving fewer than 2% of visitors.

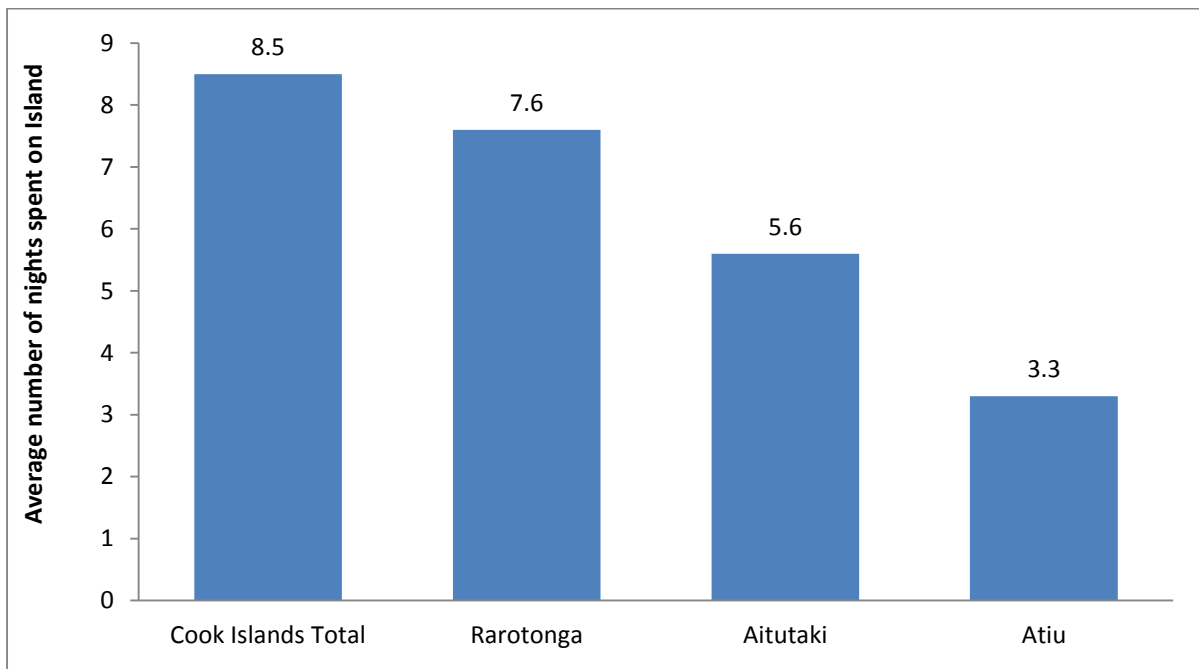
**Figure 14: Visited Islands (n=787)**



*Note: Respondents could visit more than one island, so total does not add up to 100%.*

The average length of stay on Rarotonga is 7.6 nights (Figure 15). For the visitors that went to Aitutaki, the average number of nights spent on the island is 5.6.

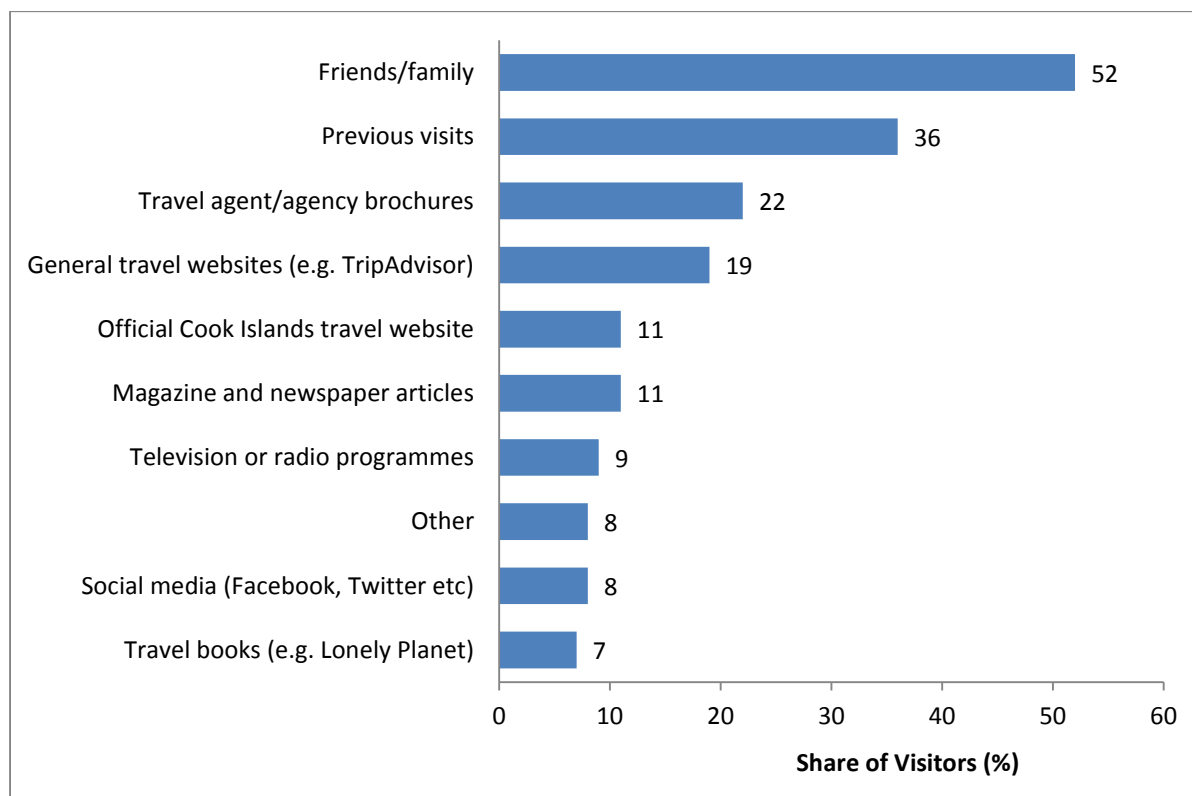
**Figure 15: Average length of stay in the Cook Islands and on each island (n=783)**



## Information Sources and Purchasing Behaviour

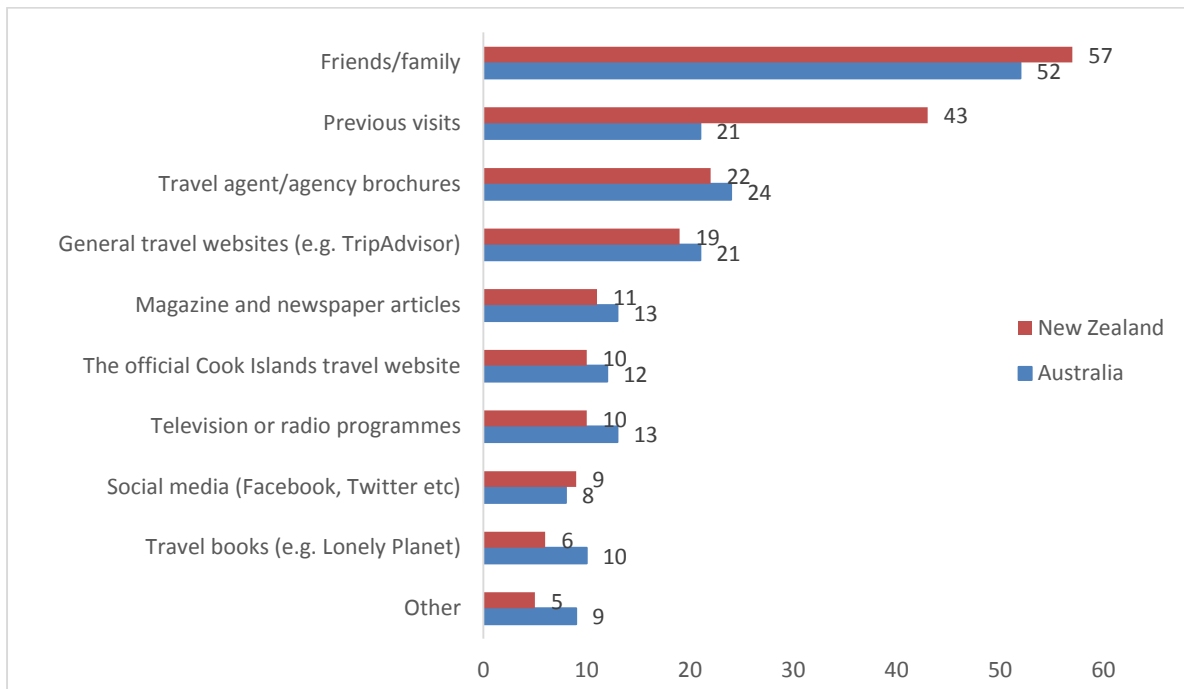
Participants were asked how they had found out about the Cook Islands as a holiday destination for this trip, and to rank the three sources of information that were most important in this respect (Figure 16). Over half (52%) of respondents ranked word of mouth from friends and family members as the most important influence, followed by previous experience (36%), travel agents (22%), and general travel websites (e.g. Tripadvisor) (19%).

**Figure 16: How did you find out about Cook Islands as a destination (n=785)**



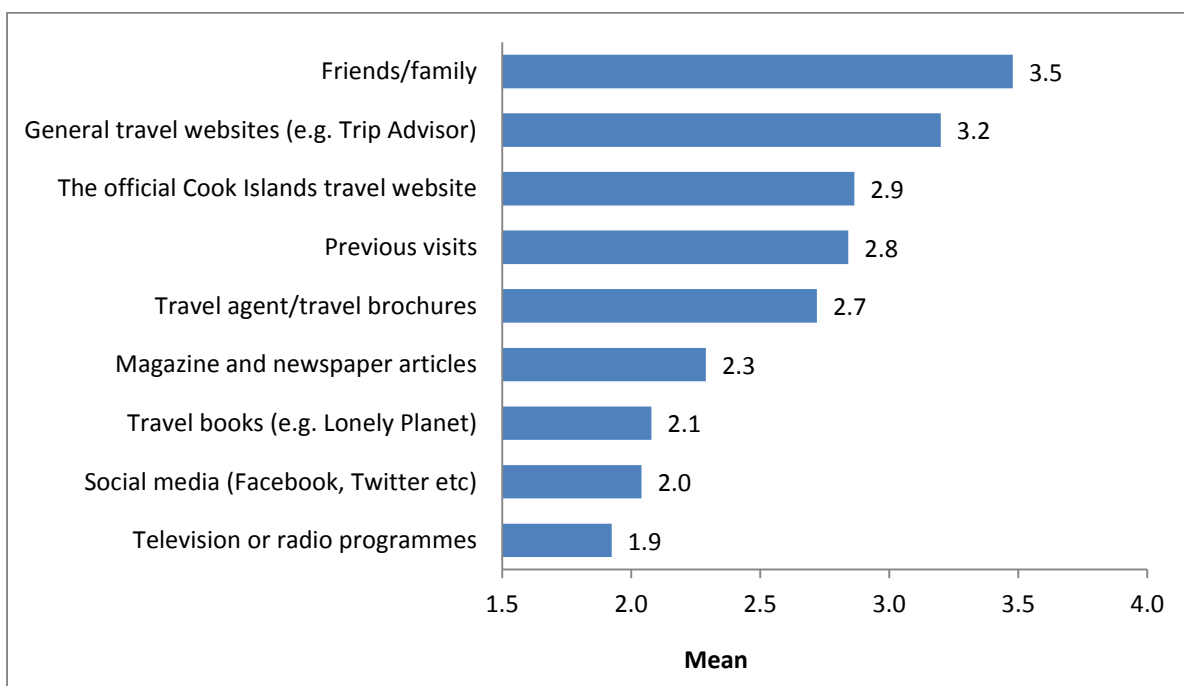
Visitors from New Zealand are more likely to seek information about a destination from word of mouth from friends and family members, their own previous experience, and social media. As mentioned above, there are more repeat visitors from New Zealand than Australia, nearly half of visitors from New Zealand (43%) ranked their previous visits as the most important information source, which is more than double Australian visitors. More visitors from Australia ranked travel agent, travel websites, magazine and newspapers, television and radio programmes, and travel books as the most important influence.

**Figure 17: How did you find out about Cook Islands as a destination – country breakdown**



When the visitors were asked to rank the importance of the listed information sources used to plan the trip, friends and family members are ranked as the highest important information source (3.5) (Figure 18). Other important sources are general travel website (3.2), the official Cook Islands travel website (2.9), previous visit (2.8), and travel agent/travel brochures (2.7).

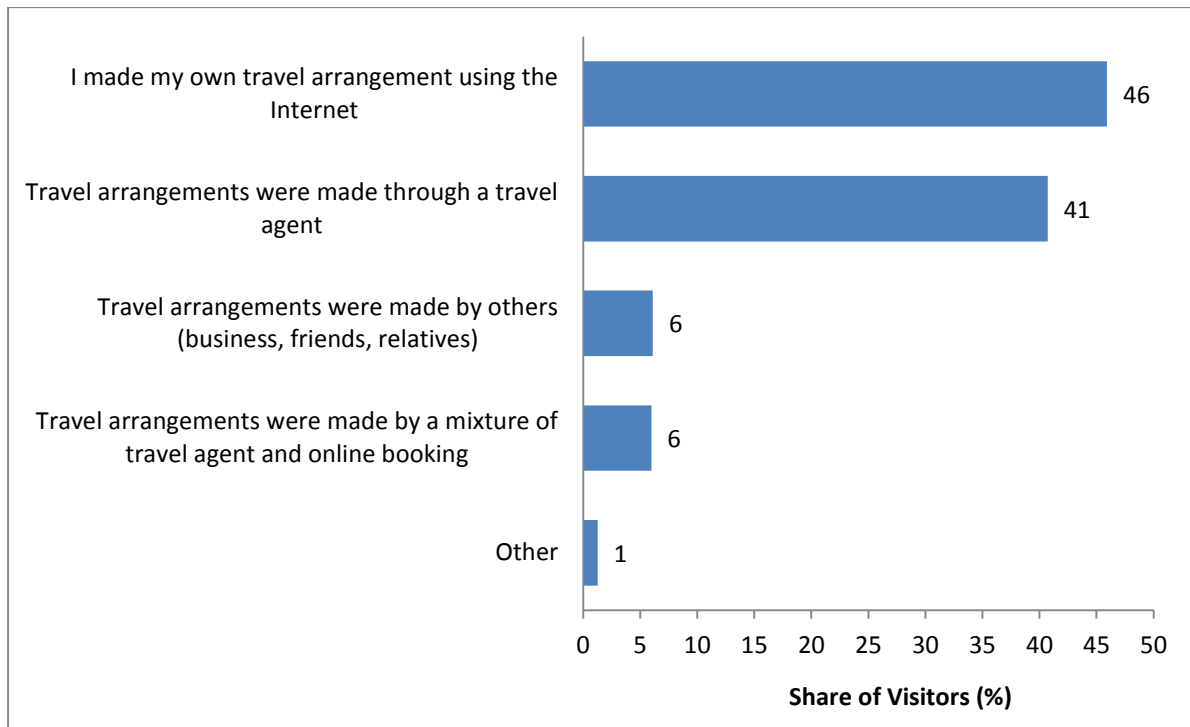
**Figure 18: How important were the following sources of information when planning your trip (n=787)**





Nearly half of visitors surveyed (46%) make their own travel arrangements through online websites or have booked directly with hotels or airlines (Figure 19). Over two thirds of visitors (41%) purchased a pre-paid trip through travel agents, followed by 6% of visitors whose travel was arranged by others, or by a mixture of travel agent and online booking.

**Figure 19: How did you purchase your travel to the Cook Islands (n=786)**

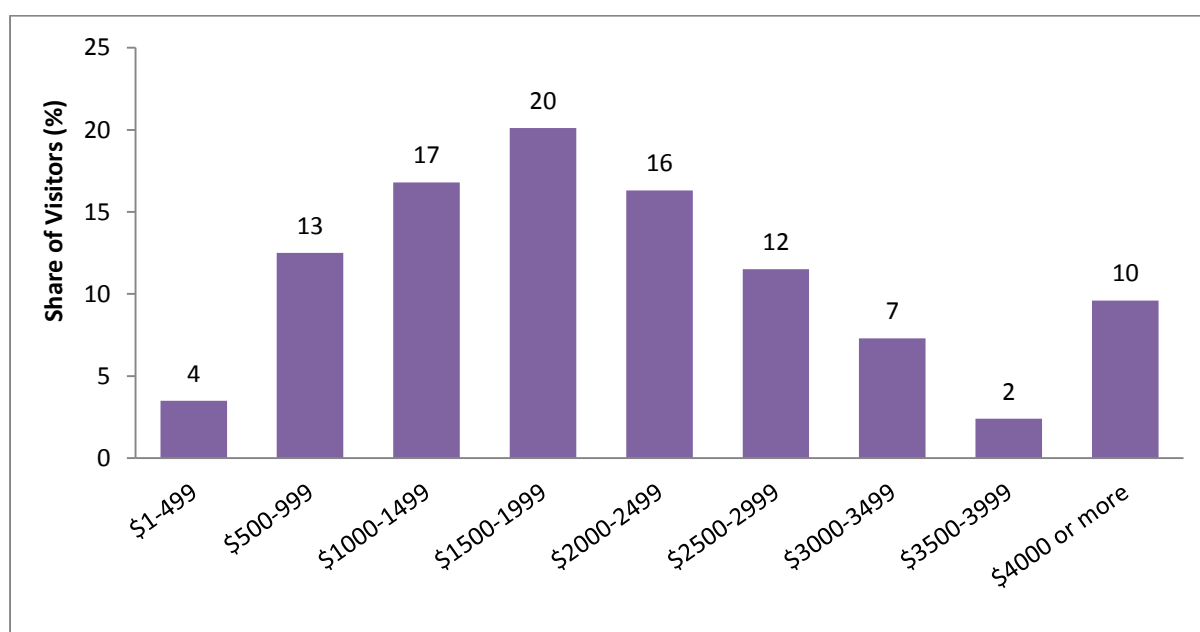


## Visitor Expenditure

The survey asked a range of questions about visitor expenditure, both prior to arrival and while in the country. All the figures below are based on respondent estimates of their own spending and any others they spent money on (e.g. spouse, children). The following pre-paid expenditure section is based on the number of adults and children that respondents included in their cost estimates: 1,908 people comprising 1,647 adults and 261 children.

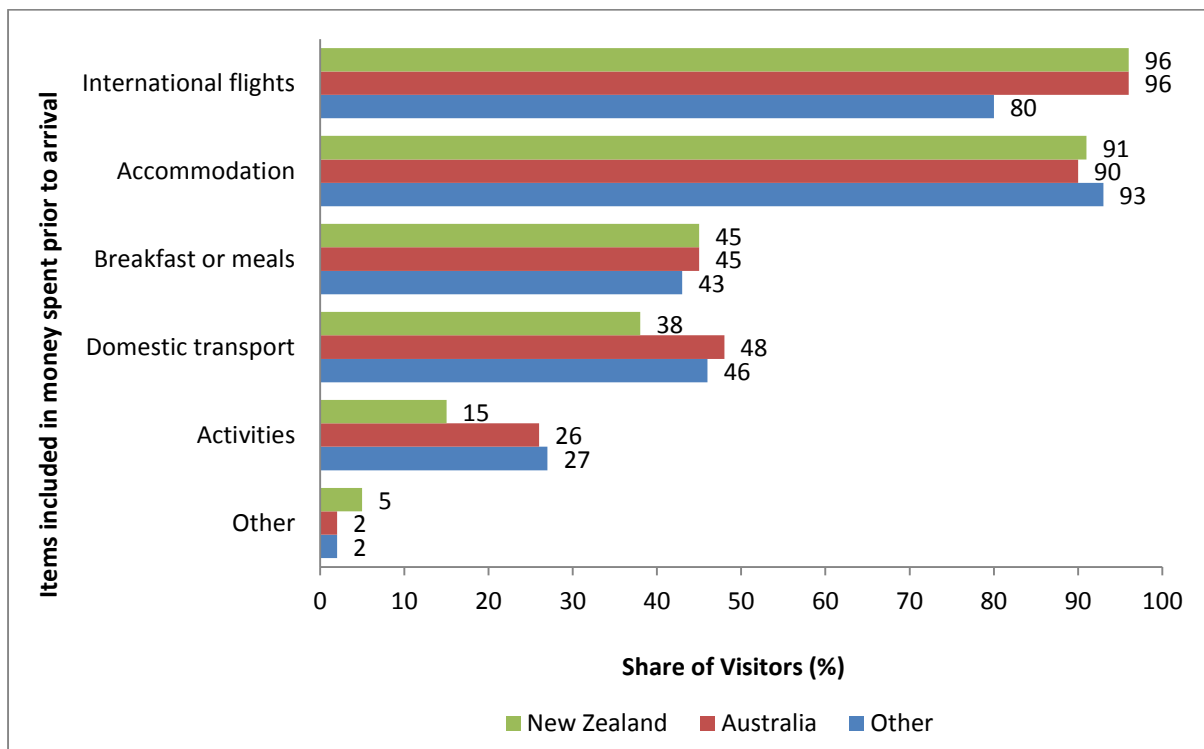
On average, visitors to the Cook Islands spend NZ\$2,173 per person prior to arrival. Over half (53%) of the visitors spend between NZ\$1,000 and NZ\$2,500 prior to arrival. These figures are higher than the data from the previous year (average spend of NZ\$2,000 for 2014/15) and in the same quarter for 2014/15 (NZ\$2,121) (Figure 20).

**Figure 20: Amount of money spent per person prior to arrival (n=626)**



In addition to international flights and domestic transport, spending prior to arrival usually includes accommodation: in 91% of the cases for New Zealand visitors, 90% for Australian visitors, and for 93% of visitors from other countries (Figure 21). Just under half of visitors prepaid for breakfast and meals prior to arrival (45% for New Zealand visitors, 45% for Australian visitors, and for 43% of visitors from other countries) which is higher than the data from the previous year and in the same quarter for 2014/15. Activities are much less likely to be included in pre-paid expenses.

**Figure 21: Items included in money spent prior to arrival (n=591)**



It is difficult to estimate accurately the proportion of the pre-paid spend that flows to the Cook Islands. For the purposes of this study, and based on previous research in the region, we conservatively estimate that 50% of the pre-paid spend is allocated to airfares. Of the remaining 50% of the pre-paid spend, 80% of this flows back to local operators. In total this means that for every pre-paid dollar, 40 cents flows to the Cook Islands. We assess that the pre-paid spend figure per day, excluding flights, is NZ\$102 and for the average total visit is NZ\$869 (over 8.5 nights).

The total spend per visitor per day while in the Cook Islands (excluding any pre-paid expenditure) is NZ\$152 (Table 1). This figure is higher than overall spend figure for 2014/15 (NZ\$112), and higher than the same quarter in 2014/15 (NZ\$108). The majority of money spent locally is on accommodation (41%), restaurants, cafes and bars (21%), shopping (9%), and activities (7%). These per person expenditure figures are based on 891 survey responses covering a total of 1,675 people (1,470 adults and 205 children).

By multiplying daily spend by the average stay (8.5 nights) we can see that each visitor spends on average NZ\$1,292 during their time in the Cook Islands. The total figure of what is spent locally and what flows back to the Cook Islands from pre-paid expenses is therefore NZ\$254 per visitor per day (\$152+\$102), or NZ\$2,161 (\$1,292+\$869) for each visitor.

**Table 1: Average visitor expenditure in the Cook Islands (per person per day)**

Expenditure Items	Overall n=1675	
	Mean (NZ\$)	(% of spend)
Accommodation	62	41
Restaurant, cafes and bar	32	21
Shopping	13	9
Activities	10	7
Vehicle rental	9	6
Domestic flights	9	6
Groceries	8	5
Other	2	1
Cruising	2	1
Petrol	2	1
Internet cost	2	1
Public transportation	1	1
<b>Total Expenditure</b>	<b>152</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 2 provides an overview of the in-country expenditure by the visitor's country of origin. Visitors from Australia and North America have the highest average spend per day at around NZ\$160 respectively. In comparison, New Zealanders spend on average nearly NZ\$10 less per day (NZ\$150).

**Table 2: Average expenditure per visitor per day by country of origin**

Expenditure Items	n=85	n=115	n=453	n=23
	USA/ Canada	Australia	New Zealand	Europe
Accommodation	54	60	64	56
Restaurant, cafes and bar	38	32	33	24
Shopping	19	17	12	10
Vehicle rental	7	9	9	6
Activities	17	13	9	7
Domestic flights	11	10	8	17
Groceries	7	9	8	11
Other	1	1	2	3
Cruising	1	3	2	4
Petrol	2	2	2	1
Internet cost	3	2	1	2
Public transportation	1	1	1	1
<b>Total spend (NZ\$)</b>	<b>\$161</b>	<b>\$160</b>	<b>\$150</b>	<b>\$141</b>

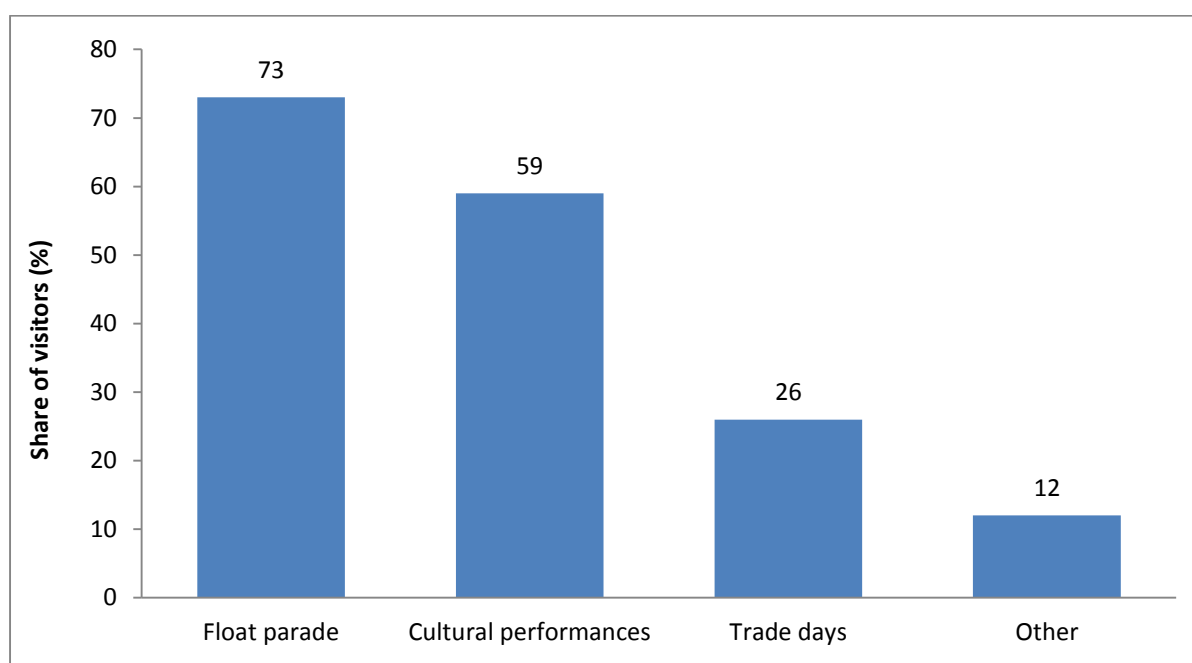
Average Australian spend per person for this quarter (NZ\$160) was higher compared to the 2014/15 average of NZ\$115, also higher than the same quarter in 2014/15 (NZ\$115). New Zealanders' spend of NZ\$150 per person per day was up from the average of \$111 for 2014/15 and the same quarter in the previous year (NZ\$107). European visitor spend at NZ\$141 per person per day was up from the average for 2014/15 of NZ\$115, and NZ\$102 for the same quarter in the previous year. Visitors from USA/Canada spend of NZ\$161 for this period was higher than the 2014/15 average of NZ\$125, and NZ\$113 for the same quarter in 2014/15.

## Special event section - Te Maeva Nui 2015

In order to better understand the impact of the Te Maeva Nui 2015 (50th Constitution Celebrations), a special event section was added as part of the survey from July to September 2015. There are 122 surveyed visitors who participated in Te Maeva Nui 2015, 16% of the total respondents. Of this group 11% came to the Cook Islands specifically for the event (or 2% of all those surveyed during the three month period).

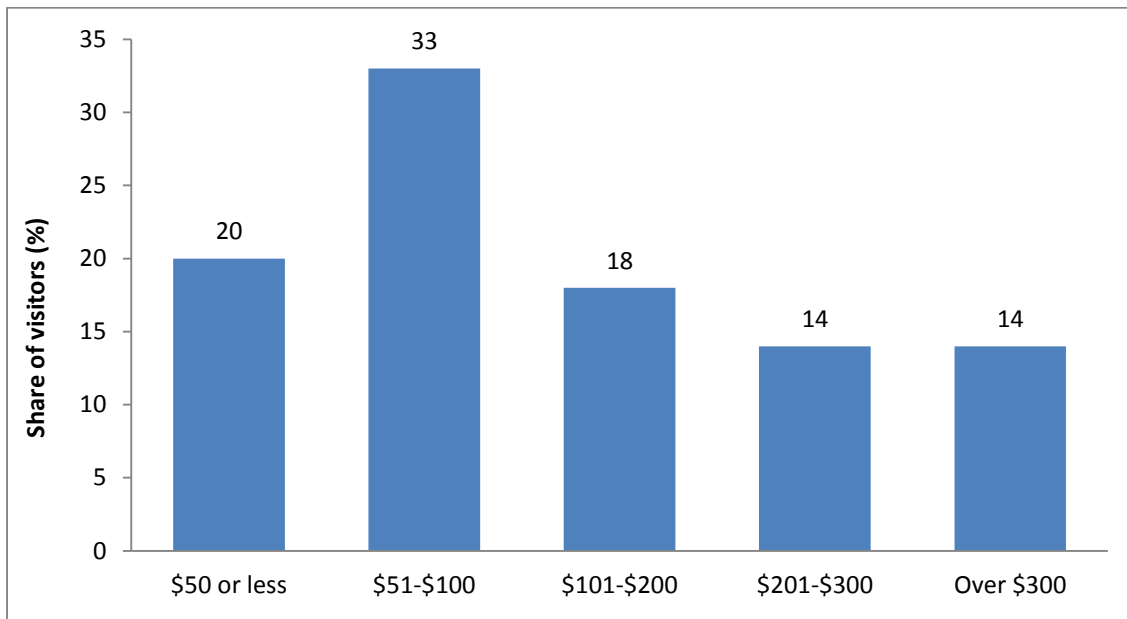
Visitors were asked “What did you attend in Te Maeva Nui 2015 (50th Constitution Celebrations)”. Of the 122 respondents who participated in Te Maeva Nui 2015, nearly three quarters (73%) of the respondents participated in the float parade, and over half (59%) of them participated in the cultural performance (Figure 22).

**Figure 22: What did you attend in Te Maeva Nui 2015? (n=121)**



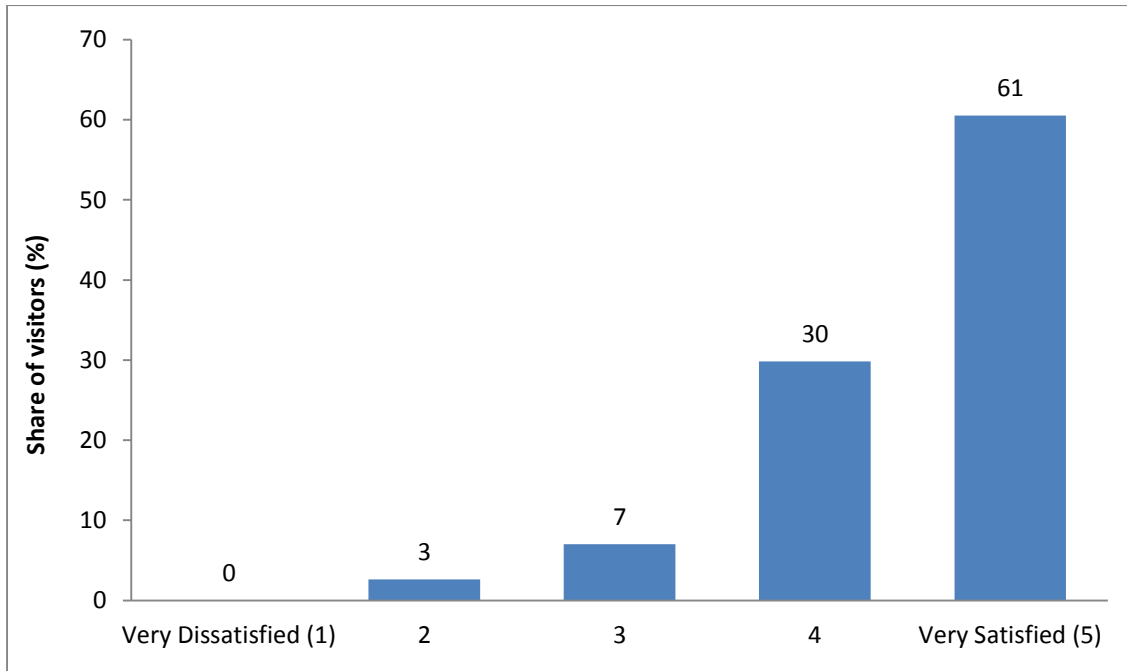
When visitors were asked “did you make any purchases at the Te Maeva Nui 2015 (50th Constitution Celebrations) this year”, nearly half (49%) of the respondents indicated that they purchased something at the event. Of these 49% of visitors (59 respondents), the average spends is NZ\$236 (median NZ \$100) with one third of them spending NZ\$50 to NZ\$100 at the event (Figure 23).

**Figure 23: How much did you spend at Te Maeva Nui 2015 (in NZ\$)? (n=49)**



When asked about their satisfaction with the event, 91% of them felt either satisfied or very satisfied with the event experience (Figure 24), with an average of 4.5 out of 5.

**Figure 24: Overall how satisfied were you with your experience of Te Maeva Nui 2015 (n=114)**



## Visitor Satisfaction

Visitors were asked to indicate their overall satisfaction with their experience of the Cook Islands on a scale from 1 'very dissatisfied' to 5 'very satisfied' (Figure 25). Just two thirds (66%) of the visitors surveyed were 'very satisfied' with their overall experience of the Cook Islands. Very few visitors (2%) were unsatisfied with their visit, and gave a score of 2 or lower out of five.

**Figure 25: Overall satisfaction with experience of the Cook Islands (n=713)**

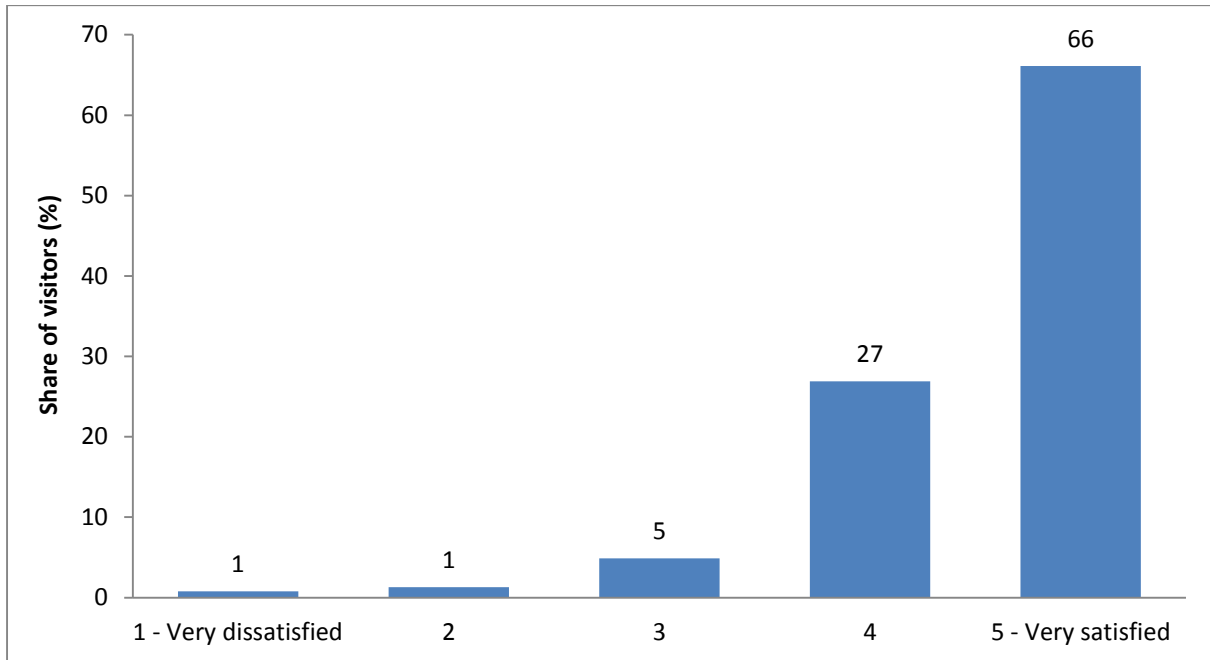
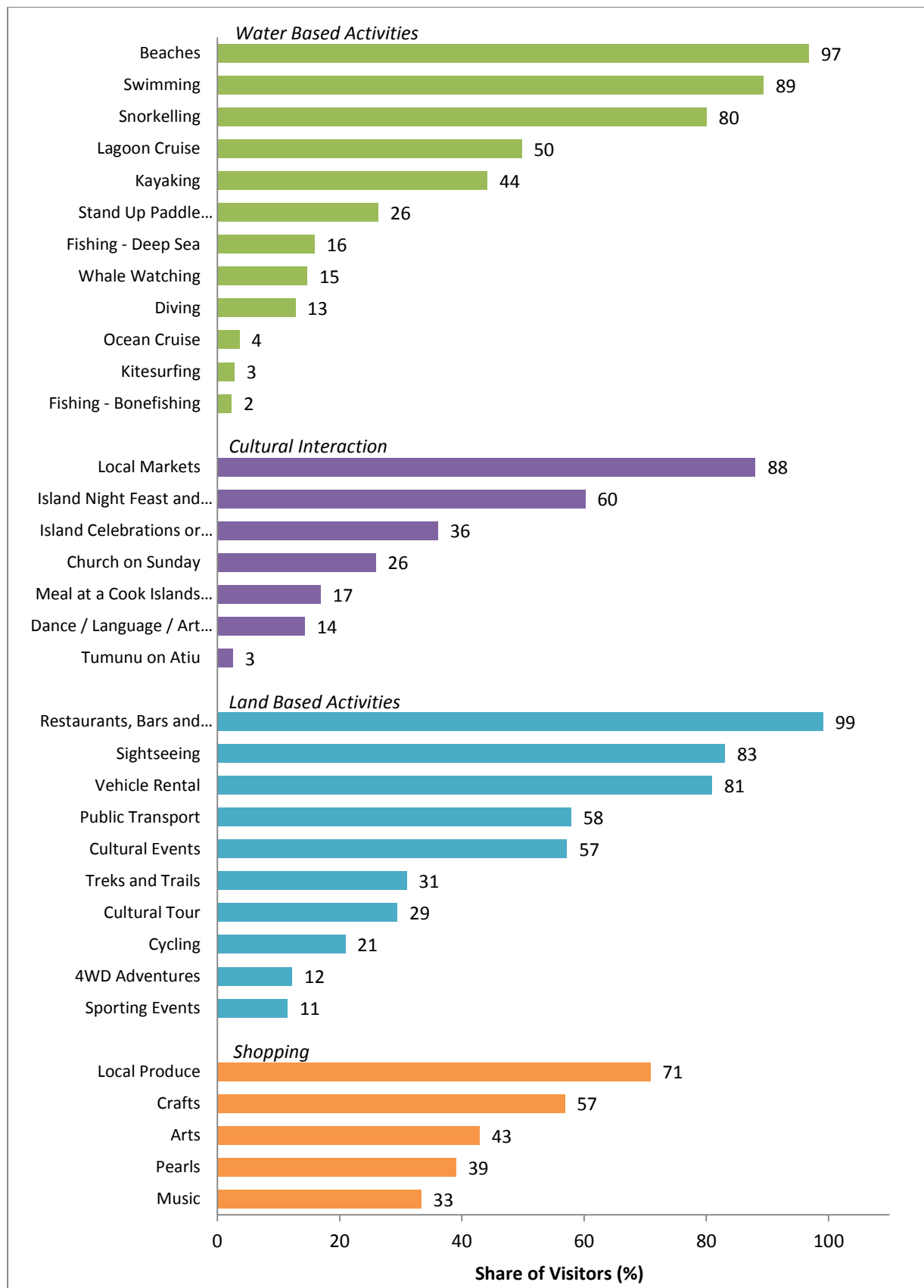


Figure 26 shows the percentage of respondents who undertook an activity while on their visit to the Cook Islands. Almost all visitors participate in water activities and visit at least one restaurant or café during their trip. Most of the respondents (88%) visit a local market, and 60% of visitors experience an Island Night and Feast Show.

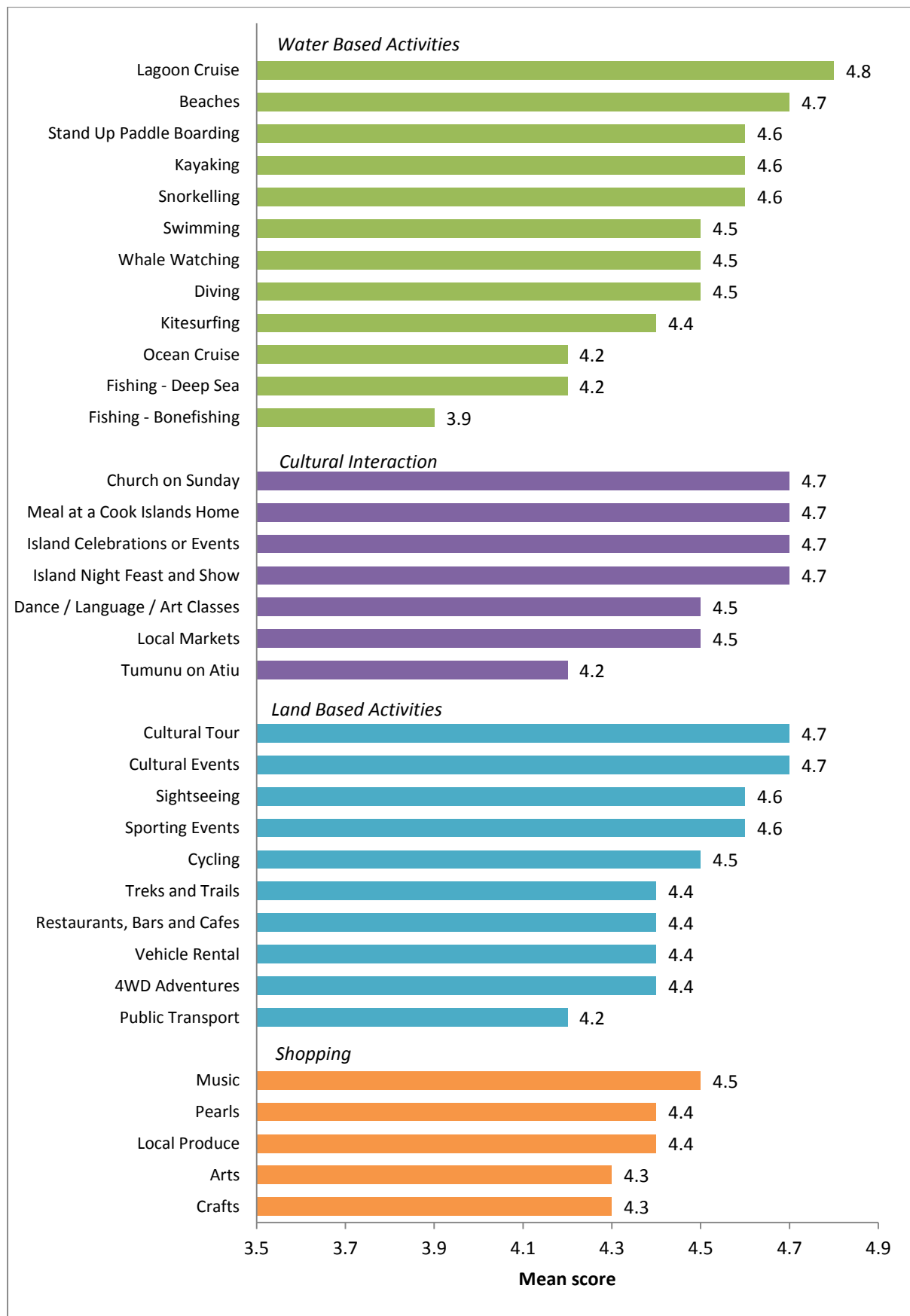
Figure 27 shows their level of satisfaction with these activities. Visitor satisfaction is generally high for all activities undertaken (all registering more than 4 out of a possible high of 5). Activities involving water-based activities (average satisfaction of 4.6), and cultural interaction activities (4.6) rank the highest, followed by land-based activities (4.5) and shopping (4.4). It should be noted that some activities e.g. kitesurfing, bonefishing, and Tumunu on Ati, are characterised by relatively low numbers of participants (n=14-17).



**Figure 26: Degree of participation in activities (n range=14-768)**



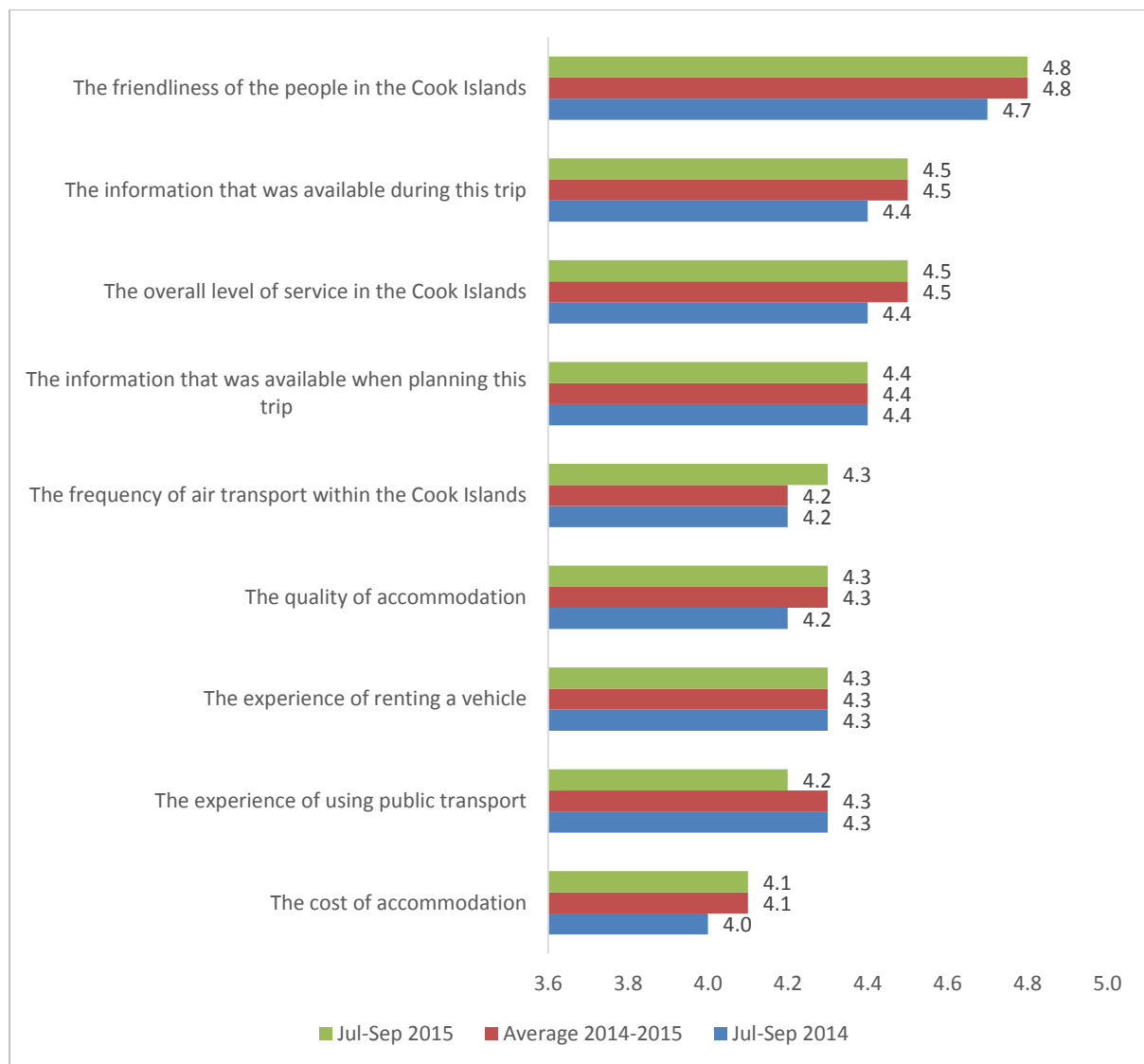
**Figure 27: Degree of satisfaction in activities participated in (mean score out of 5)**



Visitors were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with nine different statements relating to their most recent visit to the Cook Islands. Responses from the period of July to September are compared to the same period of 2014/15, and the annual average for 2014/15 (Figure 28). Respondents have consistently given the friendliness of the people in the Cook Islands the highest score at 4.8 out of 5.

This quarter also shows a slight upward trend in the level of satisfaction with the frequency of air transport within the Cook Islands compared to the average for 2014/15. Visitor satisfaction levels with the experience of using public transport is lower when compared to the annual figure of 2014/15 and the same quarter in 2014/15. Overall visitor satisfaction levels are fairly consistent with the previous findings and no rating fell below 4 out of 5.

**Figure 28: Degree of satisfaction with Cook Island services (mean score out of 5) (n=773)**



## Most appealing aspects of the Cook Islands

Visitors were asked “What did you find most attractive or appealing about the Cook Islands on your most recent visit?” (Table 3). The most appealing elements of the Cook Islands experience are the friendly and helpful local people and their culture, the beautiful and clean natural environment, the tourist attractions and activities on offer, and the peacefulness and relaxing atmosphere of the islands. Smaller numbers of visitors mentioned aspects such as the food and beverages (13%), accommodation (6%), level of service (5%), and the convenience of the Cook Islands as a destination (5%). These figures are relatively similar to the annual average for 2014-2015 where respondents rated the top three most appealing aspects as the ‘environment’ (52%), ‘local people’ (43%) and ‘atmosphere’ (29%).

**Table 3: Most appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n=746)**

Themes	Share of respondents (%)
Local people & culture	52%
Environment, cleanliness & weather	50%
Activities, attractions, entertainment & events	27%
Atmosphere	22%
Food and Beverage	13%
Accommodation	6%
Convenience & safety	6%
Level of service	5%
Overall good experience	4%
Un-commercial	3%

\* Share of respondents who made a comment that falls into each theme. Respondents could give more than one answer, so total does not add up to 100%.

### **Local people and culture**

Just over half of the respondents (52%) noted that the most appealing part of their visit was their interaction with local people in the Cook Islands with comments about the friendliness, welcoming nature and helpfulness of local people, and the Cook Islands culture. Key words that dominated the responses included ‘friendly’, ‘warm’, ‘helpful’, ‘beautiful’, ‘genuine’, ‘welcoming’, and ‘island time’. Comments included:

*“The people are wonderful and friendly. In fact Rarotonga is probably the friendliest place and we have been to most islands in the South Pacific.”*

*“This was my first visit and I loved the very relaxed atmosphere and friendliness of the local people. I felt like they enjoyed the tourists and I was never made to feel like a tourist. Nothing was too much trouble and I believe the local people are very proud and patriotic.”*

*“We loved the general relaxed Island life.”*

*“The Native Island people are very laid back and friendly and courteous and just Nice! Nothing was a problem and this all outside any resort as we stayed privately.”*

*“The friendly people and the Christian foundation of the culture.”*

*“It's a beautiful island but the gracious friendliness of the locals was amazing and really made my holiday perfect.”*

### **Environment, cleanliness & weather**

One in two respondents (50%) considered the ‘beautiful’ and ‘clean’ natural environment, and the warm and sunny climate to be the most appealing aspects of their Cook Islands experience. Visitors used words such as ‘awesome’, ‘fantastic’, ‘stunning’, ‘amazing’, ‘lovely’, and ‘unspoilt’ to describe the environment. Most comments here focused on the beauty and the cleanliness of the beaches and lagoons, the weather, the pristine water, and the beauty of the islands in general. Comments included:

*“The weather and how clean and tidy Rarotonga is.”*

*“Living in Queensland, people wonder why we'd travel half-way across the Pacific to walk along a beach. Rarotonga is STUNNINGLY beautiful and the pace of life makes it impossible to do anything but relax. Walking along a Raro beach is something quite special.”*

*“The great weather, clear blue water, and to be able to stay beach front.”*

*“Loved Rarotonga, completely struck by the ranges in the middle of the island, loved the lagoon, Atitutaki - the beauty of the lagoon, the amazing geology and structure of Atiu: yep I love rocks!”*

*“The beautiful beaches and sunny weather.”*

*“Loved how clean the island was, loved the sunsets, loved the colour of the lagoon.”*

### **Activities, attractions, entertainment & events**

Activities, attractions, entertainment and events were mentioned by 27% of respondents as the most appealing elements of their visit to the Cook Islands. Most comments in this category focus on water-based activities such as swimming, snorkelling and lagoon cruises. Land-based activities that respondents mentioned included the experience of travelling around the island by scooter, shopping, walks, cultural tours, the Cook Islands 50<sup>th</sup> celebrations and local markets. Comments included:

*“We thoroughly enjoyed participating in non-structured, non-tourism events. e.g Raro Idol, a book launch on cyclone Martin, 48hr Rialto secondary school competition movie preview at Te Ore college.”*

*“Being able to swim in the sea just a few metres from our bungalow, the Punarei culture tour, going to the Miss Cook Islands pageant, seeing the birds on Honeymoon Island.”*

*“Island night was awesome. The market was really neat.”*

*“Snorkelling, sightseeing, driving around. The very eclectic movie cinema! The markets on Saturday morning, and our hosts at tropical sands. Also the Muri night markets.”*

### **Atmosphere**

Nearly a quarter of visitors surveyed (22%) focused on the relaxed atmosphere of the Cook Islands. They considered the Cook Islands to be very peaceful, relaxing, and laid-back, which made it a good destination to ‘rest’ and ‘unwind’. Respondents used words such as ‘quiet’, ‘relaxing’, ‘laid back’, ‘easy’, and ‘slow pace’ to describe the overall atmosphere of the Cook Islands. The notion of ‘island time’ was also mentioned. Comments included:

*“The laid back holiday atmosphere.”*

*“Great place to relax and have a break.”*

*“The laid back feel of the islands. (Island time).”*

*“The laid back feeling of the island. No traffic lights, no people hounding you to buy goods from them while trying to relax on the beach.”*

### **Food and beverage**

Just over one in ten respondents (11%) mentioned food and beverages as the most appealing aspect of their trip. Their comments focused on the quality and range of food and beverages available in the Cook Islands. They used words such as ‘great’, ‘amazing’, ‘delicious’, and ‘fresh’ to describe the food. Many visitors commented on the great selection of good cafes and restaurants. Comments included:

*“The food at small local places and the market.”*

*“We found the night market at Muri very good and the food was excellent, plus we were impressed how Rarotonga had gone ahead since our last visit with all the various eating places and the dairy at Muri by the Muri Beachcomber was so well stocked with a variety of food and drink.”*

*“Lunches with local seafood (highlights were Waterline and Mooring Cafe).”*

*“Plenty of good value local restaurants with quality fish on the menu.”*

*“Great food and dining experiences to suit every budget.”*

### **Accommodation**

Another 6% of respondents noted that the accommodation they stayed in was an appealing aspect of their visit to the Cook Islands, referring to the quality of the offering, the setting, the level of service, and the warm welcome from their hosts. Comments included:

*“Our owner where we stayed was so lovely and accommodating to our needs.”*

*“The proximity of the beautiful beach at Palm Grove and the great service provided by the Palm Grove staff. And may it long continue.”*

*“Our accommodation was very well placed to the lagoon.”*

*“When you arrive at your resort (The Sunset resort) and most of the staff have been there for a long time. You know this place is special.”*

### **Convenience and safety**

The convenience and safety of the Cook Islands as a holiday destination was mentioned by six percent of respondents as an appealing aspect of their trip. In particular, they referred to the ease of getting to the Cook Islands, and also of getting around the islands, the wide use of the English language, the convenience of using the New Zealand dollar, and the feeling of safety. Comments included:

*“The ease of getting around the island. Also having lots of different beaches to visit.”*

*“Everything about visiting Rarotonga is easy - currency, language, getting around, service. It's very beautiful and relaxing to visit.”*

*“Relaxed, safe, familiar (NZ currency, English speaking, friendly culture, etc).”*

*“The beautiful scenery, the ease of travelling around Rarotonga. The fact it felt safe walking home from Muri beach to Avana at night time, no dangerous insects etc, safe drinking water.”*

### **Level of service**

Five percent of visitors commented on the service they encountered while in the Cook Islands as being an appealing feature of their trip. Respondents had positive things to say about the local hospitality they experienced, especially mentioning the friendly and helpful staff at the restaurants, bars, hotels, and resorts. Visitors also emphasised the lack of pressure to buy which made them feel comfortable. Comments included:

*“The laid back and easy nature of people particularly when interacting with service providers and business owners in general. I was very impressed with the level of service and willingness to personally interact with visitors. The tone and feel of Rorotona was*

*special, different, what you want on a holiday. I think that you could market this more – it's about people - as much as the geographical features."*

*"Quality of service from most of the tourist services."*

*"We found it very laid back and hassle free. The markets were great and store owners not pushy. The people were very accommodating and friendly and we appreciated their acceptance of us into their wonderful community."*

*"The friendliness and helpfulness of staff at our hotel and people we met during our stay. The assistance from the bus drivers. (I think they are very influential towards a good experience in the Cooks)."*

### **Overall good experience**

Four percent of visitors surveyed simply stated that their whole experience was a good one, and that they 'loved everything'. Some visitors expressed their desire to visit the Cook Islands again in the future. Comments included:

*"We knew as soon as we arrived (in Rarotonga) that we would want to come back for another visit and include trips to the other islands."*

*"...as this was our 14th trip to Raro it must be clear that the Cooks are doing it "right"."*

*"The whole island. Loved everything about it."*

*"The people, the cultural, the views, the beach.....everything!"*

### **Un-commercial**

Three percent of respondents mentioned the Cook Islands as being a place that is not over-commercialised or over-developed. Some visitors also emphasised the importance of preserving the destination from mass tourism development and keeping it the way it is. Comments included:

*"No HIGH RISE buildings. Sincerely hope it stays that way. Chickens everywhere."*

*"The fact that it is not overdeveloped with big ugly high rises buildings or apartments and doesn't have lots of bars or big shopping malls etc. is very attractive. I think this is an important point of difference between the Cook Islands and other holiday destinations like Bali or Thailand which can be too crowded and busy - not appealing anymore to many older travellers."*

*"That it is still a laid back, not too touristy developed place to visit."*

*"Relatively undeveloped and unspoiled nature of the islands we visited and the friendliness and generous nature of the people."*



## Least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands

Visitors were also asked “What did you find least attractive or appealing about the Cook Islands on your most recent visit?” Nearly a quarter (24%) of the visitors took the trouble to note that they ‘can’t think of anything’, that they ‘always enjoy’, or that the only unappealing aspect was that they ‘have to leave’. These visitors expressed that they “loved everything” and that “it was fantastic”. There were, however, a number of areas that did attract comments (Table 4). These comments ranged from the lack of public services and facilities, the price of goods and services, to fears that the Cook Islands are becoming too commercialised/ touristy. Each theme is discussed in more depth below the following table.

**Table 4: Least appealing aspects of the Cook Islands (n=682)**

Themes	Share of respondents (%)
Public services, facilities and infrastructure	18%
Food and Beverage	12%
Poor weather	11%
Rubbish and natural environment care	11%
Stray animals and mosquitos	11%
Price of goods and services	11%
Accommodation	11%
Customer service	10%
Rental cars or scooters	5%
Attractions and activities	5%
Local people and social issues	4%
Flight related issues	3%
Becoming too commercialised/touristy	2%

\* Share of respondents who made a comment that falls into each theme. Respondents could give more than one answer, so total does not add up to 100%.

### Public services, facilities and infrastructure

One of the least appealing aspects for visitors is the lack of public services, facilities and infrastructure in the Cook Islands (18%). Many of the comments were about the poor condition of the local roads with on-going road works, speeding traffic, and the dangerous potholes, especially for scooters at night. Some people also complained about the lack of safe, well-formed footpaths. Others expressed their disappointment with other aspects: the lack of internet access, and the poor public transport and facilities, such as public toilets. Comments included:

*“State of the roads. Five years ago they weren't too bad, but in some areas around Muri and other parts of the island, you have to drive in the middle of the road (if there's no oncoming traffic) to avoid potholes and worn out areas of road.”*

*“Limited bus transportation on holidays or once the anti-clockwise bus stopped running.”*

*“No easily read road signs and pot holes in roads made driving difficult.”*

*“Internet was very expensive, and I felt I didn't use anywhere near the amount of download that I was charged for. Honestly, felt ripped off by the internet provider.”*

*“Had a bad time hiking up to the highest point of Rarotonga, not enough markings on the path and we got lost, we were really worried until one of the local dogs found us and got us back onto the track. Need more signage, difficulty levels displayed etc...”*

*“Sad for the people that the tourist money does not seem to be evident in upgrading the roads and their public facilities but maybe that is not an issue for them. I would like to see helmets on the motorbikes. I know it is not a fast pace but a fall of a bike at any speed is potentially very nasty for the brain.”*

*“The roads. Need to be upgraded to accommodate increased numbers of pedestrians and scooters.”*

*“You have a MAJOR new problem with the wifi on the island. It was disgusting how much we had to pay to be able to work, compared to previous years, and received zero understanding from your wifi service providers when we complained.”*

### **Food and Beverage**

A number of visitors (12%) commented on the cost, quality and availability of food and beverage in the Cook Islands. Respondents complained about the price and quality of food, the lack of local produce (especially fresh fruit and fish), and the limited eating options available outside the resorts. Some visitors also mentioned the poor customer service in restaurants and the lack of knowledge about food and wine on offer. Responses covered food and beverage options, such as restaurants, resort dining, shops and markets. Comments included:

*“We expected to have better access to fresh fruits and vegetables.”*

*“The lack of fresh tropical fruits, even at the resort. All the fruit at the resort was from a tin except for NZ apples and pears. I had hoped to enjoy the local fruit but even at the market it was difficult to find. If I lived there I would be planting lot more fruit trees and gardens.”*

*“I was shocked that most of the fruit was imported from NZ.”*

*“Unpredictable opening/closing times of cafes/restaurants left us hungry a few times.”*

*“Probably the price and quality of meal in supermarkets could be better....but maybe that's not feasible given it has to be shipped over...think next time will bring ours with us...”*

*“The food. Greasy, all tasted like fish, gourmet burgers just involved a fried egg, very disappointed with 80% of meals out.... Luckily the other 20% were fantastic.”*

*“Market not enough choice of fresh vegetables.”*

*“The food at most eateries caters for tourists. It would have been nice to have more traditional food options to try.”*

*“Greasy stodgy food that is quiet expensive for the quality.”*

*“The main thing we commented on was the lack of fresh fruit and vegetables in the supermarkets. The food was so expensive compared to at home, but we did understand a lot of food is flown in but we thought we would be able to buy local tropical fruit more easily.”*

*“Restaurants are a bit behind the times, much of the food comes from NZ. I would have liked to have smaller simpler meals using as much local fresh produce as possible and traditional dishes.”*

*“The food quality is nowhere near Tahiti or Fiji.”*

### **Poor weather**

Quite a high number of survey respondents (11%) expressed their disappointment with the weather conditions on the Cook Islands. In particular complaints were made about the amount of rain and the wind, although some respondents acknowledged the weather was seasonal and cannot be changed. Comments included:

*“Wasn't warm enough for us to swim.”*

*“The weather did not cooperate and was not quite what we expected. But that isn't something you can correct. We chose the time of year.”*

*“Disappointed re weather.....windy & cool which meant snorkelling was not as good as on a past visit. “*

*“It was a lot cooler than we thought it would be in July.”*

*“The wind stopped us enjoying the water. We wanted to swim and snorkel a lot more, but was surprised at the coolness of the sea and again the wind was cold.”*

*“I was a bit disappointed with the weather as I was expecting it to be warmer. I believe it was unseasonal cool even for the local people.”*

### **Rubbish and natural environment care**

Several visitors (11%) mentioned waste management and the lack of care of the natural environment in the Cook Islands as unappealing factors. Rubbish on the beaches and streets, the burning of trash, and the abandoned buildings were often commented upon. The poor condition of the lagoons and beaches, erosion, polluted water, degraded coral reefs, and threatened marine life also concerned a small group of visitors. Comments included:

*“It also stresses me out seeing people walk on the coral/reef as it's bad for the coral.”*

*"I am really concerned about the coral in the lagoon. There is a touch of colour but the majority of it was very grey. Snorkelling in the lagoon and seeing the beautiful tropical fish was wonderful but what is the future for them going to be like if their home is dying. People, including myself, stand on the coral. What damage is this causing? Research needs to be done on the coral to find ways to stop it from dying and to help it to stay alive and come back to being colourful and alive again. A big attraction to the Cook Islands is the opportunity to go snorkelling and view the coral and the fish. Action needs to be done to protect this precious natural environment in a way that helps the fish to remain there and prosper and for people to enjoy this wonderful environment for many years to come."*

*"More cars than needed roar on the streets, polluting the air and making too much noise. Although there are economic reasons for rental agencies to make a living, too many cars are just bad. Other countries have made their mistakes with driving up their industry but Rarotonga should not follow."*

*"Glass and rubbish on the beaches."*

*"All the fires burning (I am assuming it was rubbish and palms)."*

*"Seeing so much rubbish along the roadsides. That was disappointing in such a beautiful place."*

*"Least appealing is the huge abandoned resort... Shocking that this would happen to Rarotonga. Burning of rubbish is very unpleasant- smoke was acrid and wafted into our bungalow."*

*"Crazy noisy, dirty Raro. You have a serious trash problem along even the road from the airport to town... Take a walk along it sometime... Particularly the seaward side!"*

*"Just disappointed with the condition of the coral. Perhaps signs could be placed near the snorkelling spots advising people of the destruction caused by walking on the reefs and using kayaks at low tide."*

*"The amount of rubbish lying on the roadside that's going to end up in the water and the number of people burning rubbish that included plastic soft drink bottles and other items that don't burn well or in their entirety."*

### **Stray animals and mosquitos**

The stray dogs, noisy roosters and mosquitoes continue to be an annoyance or a worry for 11% of respondents during their time spent on the islands. This down slightly from the last annual average (13%). Respondents used a variety of words to describe dogs, including: 'annoying', 'unattractive', 'roaming', 'vicious' and 'uncared for'. Some visitors also mentioned mosquito-borne tropical diseases, such as the Dengue fever and the Chikungunya virus, and the lack of information received about this. Comments included:

*"There was talk of a mosquito virus. It stopped us going up into the hills - we were*

*planning to walk some of the cross-island path but I'm pregnant and didn't want to risk it."*

*"The continual dog fighting all night long right round the island and the roosters continuously crowing. Some members of our party will never go back because it is such a nuisance. There is nothing worse than not having a good night's sleep."*

*"The stray dogs, a dog was on heat near our accommodation on Rarotonga. On a small stretch of beach I counted 7 dogs I was walking on my own and felt so uneasy that I picked up a rock in case I needed it to protect myself as these dogs were worked up."*

*"The ROOSTERS! They drove everyone in our large group crazy! This would be something that would stop us returning as it prevented everyone getting a decent night's sleep."*

*"Not enough information about infectious diseases! Not enough concern and support for the dog and cat overpopulation and safety concerns."*

*"Threat of bugs and disease."*

### **Price of goods and service**

A number of visitors (11%) mentioned the price of goods and services as the least appealing aspect of their stay in the Cook Islands. These visitors made comments about the cost, the poor value for money and the price of things, especially for items such as accommodation, food in stores and restaurants, and internet. Comments included:

*"A lot of it is very commercial and the price of food and alcohol was very expensive. We also would have loved to explore the outer island but the travel between them was very expensive."*

*"Very over-priced compared to Fiji."*

*"Cost of living - food and accommodation costs are comparatively high."*

*"This was our third visit to the Cook Islands. Unfortunately the changes in terms of costs now make a visit here from Australia expensive in comparison to other holiday spots."*

*"Being charged double taxi fare because I was travelling alone."*

*"Everything was so expensive from food to everyday supplies to attractions."*

*"The food quality at some places is not the greatest. And given it's the same price as New Zealand, which makes it expensive. The accommodation was also pretty expensive."*

*"Would have loved to have gone to Aitutaki but plane trip and accommodation too expensive."*

*"After 6 visits over last 10 years we consider the accommodation costs are getting too expensive."*

## **Accommodation**

The poor quality/value for money of accommodation was a specific concern for a number of visitors (11%). Visitors surveyed mentioned that the cost of accommodation is expensive for the value received, that some accommodation places are in need of an upgrade of facilities and services, and that there have been some safety issues. Comments included:

*"The accommodation is a little dated."*

*"Pool of our hotel was dirty murky but this is the only complaint."*

*"The level of cleanliness in the rooms at the hotel. It was a great place to stay but a real shame that room was not clean...bathroom in particular. And previous persons rubbish in drawers... And dirty cups/teaspoons they hadn't been washed. I would go back but would ask the room to be cleaned properly."*

*"Resort seemed a bit run down in places."*

*"... our accommodation was a bit run down. We did not get a change of linen all week and room not cleaned once. We were told we had the only key which of course we took with us during the day."*

*"The hotel room had a non-working radio we could not get any reception. The TV channels were a little old. There was poor reception for the island channel and so we could not get any news."*

## **Customer service**

Ten percent of visitors surveyed complained about the poor customer service received during their visit in the Cook Islands, notably in restaurants, shops, hotels and vehicle rentals. Visitors commented about 'rude', 'unfriendly', and 'unhelpful' staff. Customer service was considered 'slow', 'inefficient', 'bad', and 'disappointing'. Comments included:

*"The green taxi women drivers...had a few try to rip us off. Tell us one price and then when we arrive it's a different price....more expensive. The one that dropped us to the airport was so rude and told us not to come back as we dared to ask her why she changed the price!!!"*

*"We had a really wonderful time except for an unfortunate experience on an around the island bus. It was our first day. We tried to board on at Muri Beach to go to the Fruits of Rartonga to snorkel. The driver was rude, unhelpful and belittling towards us when we misunderstood the cost and had incorrect fares ready. Not a good experience! We walked back in the midday heat with children in tow rather than risk meeting him again."*

*“Poor standard of service. Slow to wipe tables, ask if we would like another drink, take orders. We experienced this at more than one cafe/bar.”*

*“The attitude of many store and service staff on the island, I often felt unwelcome and like an intruder as opposed to a welcome visitor.”*

*“Rarotonga- most people were unfriendly and didn't like tourists. They don't know what service is and we will recommend friends/ family to not visit Rarotonga. They were so unhelpful. Very big difference between Aitutaki and Rarotonga.*

*“Quality of rental vehicles, some customer service was not that good. It seemed that they didn't want to be at work... So I would recommend in some places better customer service.”*

### **Other unappealing aspects**

Other unappealing aspects mentioned by visitors include: rental cars and scooters (quality, cost, service and the process of getting driving licenses), disappointment with the attractions or activities (the degradation and damage of the natural attractions and the lack of activities), local people (unfriendly, hard to get involved with them), flight/airline-related issues (influent, cost, arrival and departure times), and the fact that the destination is becoming too commercialised/touristy (over-developed, loss of authenticity).

Comments included:

#### Rental cars and scooters

*“Time it takes to hire a scoter and get licence.”*

*“Lack of helmets for hire scooters - felt unsafe.”*

*“Poor quality of rental scooter. No mirrors and occasionally lost all power.”*

*“No baby seats available when hiring a car.”*

*“We had problems with hiring a scooter and a car. It took a full morning for us to get that sorted. The wait in the office of Polynesian rentals took forever. The boys dispensing the cars and scooters were rude and arrogant. I picked up the car on time but had to wait over a half an hour as the place was locked up. When returning it nobody was there or turned up half an hour. "Island Time" in this case wasted our time and left a very bad impression on both my wife and myself.”*

*“Getting a scooter licence, revenue seeking opportunity, if you have a NZ licence then this should be sufficient, maybe a brief test drive if required. My husband failed as the questions were ridiculous as when you don't live in Rarotonga how do you know when it goes dark? We were told to come back in 2 days but as it was a Sunday and closed stated Monday by that time it was more of a joke for us as we had been driving around the island for 3 days already. We didn't bother getting one in the end we are*

*on holiday and not interested in spending our day fussing with scooter licences that you can drive in NZ on a learner's licence, total madness and needs to change."*

#### Attraction and activities

*"Not much family oriented night activities."*

*"Not enough to do."*

*"Just disappointed with the condition of the coral. Perhaps signs could be placed near the snorkelling spots advising people of the destruction caused by walking on the reefs and using kayaks at low water."*

*"The local Nuri Markets were disappointing."*

#### Local people

*"A lot of the locals were not very friendly at all, especially at souvenir shops, dairies, restaurants and hotels. We found the Fijians living in Raro were the friendliest bunch."*

*"The people seemed mostly dis interested in tourists or over tourists. Best service was from overseas operators. Shame as the Polynesian people and there warmth are what is promoted but not seen."*

*"A few rude Cook Islands people, especially at the police station, everyone else seemed nice."*

*"The hospitality of the people the Islands of Samoa and Hawaii are a lot more friendly."*

*"Compared to Fiji, Samoa and Vanuatu the locals did not seem very friendly and did not seem to go out of their way for tourists."*

*"Funnily enough we found some locals not that friendly this time. You would wave out but they did not wave back!!!"*

*"I rented a local house and nearby there were pig sties. The pigs were kept in filthy conditions with no regular food or water. Other pigs were tethered outside on rocky ground and once again with no food or water. It's disgusting the way the local people treat their pigs. I would like to lock the owners up for days on end in filthy conditions with no food or water. My friend discussed the conditions with one of the owners and she was threatened and intimidated by him. Someone needs to take this on board and treat these animals with the respect they deserve!"*

#### Flight-related issues

*"The 2.30am flight home!"*

*"Having to fly out in the middle of the night."*

*"The processes of arrival at the international airport."*



*“Having to fly via Auckland instead of direct from Christchurch, there were lots of us - time to have a rethink please!”*

*“We also had a really late flight departing at 2am and had to book a room at the airport hotel for a few hours while we waited. Although the hotel is being renovated our room was not very nice and was expensive for what it was. It would be good to have more options near the airport for late night travellers to access.”*

#### Becoming too commercialised/touristy

*“There's an emerging problem with too many vehicles on Rarotonga main island which will inevitably get larger & faster will have a significant impact on the quiet appeal of the island.”*

*“Coming back to Rarotonga after being on Aitutaki, primarily because the island was so much more busy, crowded and commercial by comparison. This was partly (largely?) because of the 50th anniversary celebrations, and we wondered if Rarotonga was normally more laid back & relaxed?”*

*“Saw more tourists than the locals.”*

*“The extent of development on Rarotonga since our previous visit 2 years ago - subdivision and construction. Also, keep the cheap Chinese imports out of the markets and shops (including imported fresh water pearls). We will continue to visit the Cooks whilst it remains an authentic Polynesian experience and hope we are supporting the locals in protecting their culture whilst earning a livelihood that balances with the beauty and fragility of your islands.”*

*“Too many new tourist facilities.”*

*“Rarotonga is getting too crowded and losing the love that you find in Aitutaki.”*

### **Suggestions to improve the visit to the Cook Islands**

When asked if there was anything that could have improved their visit to the Cook Islands, just under half (46%) of respondents said ‘yes’. Suggestions mentioned by respondents focused on public services and infrastructure (16%), weather (15%), a longer stay (14%), accommodation (13%), friendliness of locals and service levels (11%), entertainment, activities and transport (9%), environment/safety/animal care (8%), flight schedules in and out of Cook Islands (6%), quality/cost of food and beverages (6%) and value for money (4%). Comments on these themes included:

*“Probably the queue at the immigration was very long and slow, it would have been nice to have more than 2 people checking in an entire flight from Air NZ. We were in the line for just over an hour which was the only low point of our trip.”*

*“It would be good to have a stricter control on dogs running out from properties and annoying those that want to walk/cycle.”*

*"We intended to do a lot of walks, however the lack of signage, and the poorly maintained tracks were disappointing. Some tracks we could not find due to lack of road signs, and track information (both entrance to tracks, as well as historical and Botanica information to do with the tracks. This was similar for historic sites - little information and signage."*

*"Unfortunately we had a howling, freezing southerly for our entire "winter escape". It would have been good to have had more accurate seasonal weather charts in order book our holiday during a warmer Cook Island season."*

*"Accommodation prices are getting too expensive, can't visit as often as we would like to."*

*"The locals could have been more welcoming as on other Pacific islands."*

*"Focus on sustainable agriculture and transport - promote cycling and use of cargo cycles and bicycle trailers. Move to electric or solar powered vehicles. Litter was a real eyesore - so sad to see in paradise. Don't become another touristy place - keep it clean and green."*

*"Would love a direct flight from Melbourne this would make it more competitive compared to going to Bali."*

*"The flights including connections were too long. I could have flown to South Africa in the time spent to get to Cook Islands."*

*"I don't object to the price of a meal if the meal is of a suitable standard. I was astounded that no restaurant served fish other than well done and suitable for use as a doormat. But largely inedible."*

*"More fresh fruit and seafood. Too many greasy fried foods."*

*"Lower costs - but it's understandable that people need to make a living from the tourist dollar."*

## **Reasons to return to the Cook Islands and recommend to others**

The majority of visitors (94%) indicated that they would consider re-visiting the Cook Islands. This figure is slightly higher than the 2014/15 annual average of 93%, also higher than the identical quarter in 2014 (91%). The main reason given by the visitors to return to the Cook Islands is the overall great experience that the islands offer and the wish to experience this again. Other reasons are the beauty of the islands, the beaches, the great weather, the friendly local people, the peacefulness and relaxing atmosphere of the islands, and convenience with regards to travel time, language and currency.

The overall great experience is the major attraction for visitors to return to the Cook Islands, 34% of the comments by visitors were about how great the islands were, that they 'just loved it' and that the Cook Islands are the best place to relax and unwind. Comments included:

*"Loved it so much it was all I had imagined and more, fantastic place for a holiday,"*

*"It was the most relaxing holiday I ever had and it was such a lovely location to spend time."*

*"We loved it there. It was SO relaxing."*

*"Because it was idyllic, unspoiled, relaxing - it is a paradise and I have told lots of people they must go!"*

*"I loved every minute I spent in the Cook Islands!! The island is just spectacular and the people are so lovely and welcoming! It feels like home! Everything is just so beautiful and it was an amazing experience!"*

*"Because it is the only place we travel to that allows me to fully relax whenever I wish to."*

Besides the overall great experience, the beautiful natural scenery and the warm climate of the islands are mentioned by almost one third of the visitors as a reason to return to the Cook Islands. Key words used to describe the scenery include 'beautiful island(s)', 'warm climate', 'unspoilt', 'beautiful scenery', and 'lovely lagoon'. Comments include:

*"I adore the unspoilt beauty, the people & everything about the Cook Islands. If I had unlimited funds I would live part of the year there!"*

*"A wonderful relaxed vibe, incredibly friendly locals, stunning setting, so easy to have a great time!"*

*"Laid back atmosphere and beautiful scenery."*

*"It is paradise. The lagoon was spectacular. The warm climate of 25 degrees was lovely."*

*"It is the most beautiful place in the world."*

Especially visitors from New Zealand mentioned that the Cook Islands is a great destination to escape from the cold during winter.

The friendly local people are mentioned by 16% of the visitors as an important reason for their return. The visitors mentioned the kindness and helpfulness of the local people during their stay on the islands. Words used to describe the local people of the Cook Islands are 'friendly', 'wonderful', 'beautiful', 'lovely' or simply that they 'loved the people'. Comments include:

*"Just loved it, Love the people so much."*

*"Amazing place. The people were beautiful. Feels like home."*

*"We had a very good trip - will definitely return because of the friendly locals, ease of*

*travel, beautiful beaches, excellent snorkelling.”*

*“It was a really relaxing holiday and 99.9% of the people were really nice....except the green taxi (women only).”*

*“Great weather and very relaxing wonderful people.”*

*“Cause we fell in love with the islands and the nice islanders.”*

*“It is a beautiful place with wonderful people with a wonderful outlook on life.”*

The slow pace of life, the relaxed nature, peacefulness and the Cook Islands ‘lifestyle’ are other reasons for visitors to revisit the Cook Islands. The atmosphere of the islands was mentioned by one out of ten visitors. Comments include:

*“Loved the relaxed nature of the Cool Islands.’*

*“A wonderful relaxed vibe, incredibly friendly locals, stunning setting, so easy to have a great time!”*

*“Laid back atmosphere and beautiful scenery.”*

*“The people were friendly, I was able to relax as it was so laid back, and I appreciated the fact that there was no rushing about, I enjoyed the relaxed nature of the other people on the island, nothing was too much and no-one was in a hurry.”*

*“I was very impressed with my holiday and the longer I stayed the more I enjoyed it. I loved the very relaxed and unpretentious attitude and culture in the Cook Islands.”*

Another reason to come back to the Cook Islands is the convenience of a holiday to the Cook Islands, with regards to flight times from New Zealand, the currency and English as the local language. Especially for visitors from ‘close-by’, e.g. New Zealand and Australia, a holiday to the Cook Islands is an easy and much loved getaway.

Attractions and activities that can be done on the Cook Islands or the wish to explore the islands further are mentioned as a reason to return. Snorkelling was mentioned frequently as a reason to return. Some visitors are inspired by their trip to come back and visit other islands on their next visit to the Cook Islands.

Other reasons mentioned by a smaller group of visitors to revisit the Cook Islands are that it is a safe, clean and family friendly destination, visiting family and friends, food and beverage, affordable, local culture and that the Cook Islands are still sort of ‘unspoiled’ and not too commercialized.

The majority (86%) of the visitors mentioned that they would like to include the outer islands in their next visit. Most (88%) of the visitors surveyed in this quarter mentioned they would like to include ‘Aitutaki’ in their next visit to the Cook Islands. ‘Atiu’ was the second most

mentioned island at 28%; another 18% of visitors stated that they would like to visit Mangaia, 16% of the respondents would like to visit Mauke. Other respondents (6%) were 'not sure' of which islands to include, and 5% of visitors mentioned they would like to visit 'all the islands'. Only three percent mentioned the high cost of visiting other islands as a barrier for not visiting.

Of the visitors who indicated they would not want to return to the Cook Islands (6%), the main reason is they 'had been there and seen it all', some visitors added, especially return visitors, that they want to 'see other places'.

*"Would visit another previously unvisited destination for reasons of variety"*

*"Have been twice and usually like to mix it up when travelling"*

Some visitors commented that a holiday to the Cook Islands is expensive and that it has become way more expensive over the last five to ten years.

*"Priced itself off the market over last 10 years."*

*"This was our third visit- costs have increased significantly over the 5 years with the levels and standards of service not keeping up."*

Other factors included a lack of activities, poor service, distance to the Cook Islands or that it is too quiet.

Nearly all visitors surveyed (99%) said that they would recommend the destination to their family and friends which is consistent with previous survey periods.

A third (33%) of visitors surveyed stated they would recommend the Cook Islands to others because of the 'atmosphere': this was again described as 'relaxing', 'serene', 'peaceful', 'calm', 'restful' and with a 'laid-back' lifestyle. Respondents felt that the Cook Islands was a great place to 'relax' and 'unwind', and said they would recommend the Cook Islands as a good holiday destination for those who are looking for a 'relaxing atmosphere'.

Thirty-one percent of respondents said that the 'beautiful' and 'clean' natural environment of the Cook Islands was a reason to recommend the island nation to others – including the beautiful scenery, great beaches and lagoons, the warm climate, and its unspoilt natural attractions.

Just over a quarter of respondents (26%) mentioned the 'friendly' local people as a reason to recommend the Cook Islands to friends and relatives. Other words used to describe the local Cook Islanders included 'lovely', 'wonderful', 'great', 'happy', 'warm' and 'amazing'.

Just under a fifth of visitors (18%) surveyed would recommend the Cook Islands to others based on their own 'great experience'. These visitors described their trip to the Cook Islands

as a 'wonderful island experience', and said that they just 'loved everything' about it. These respondents also often described the Cook Islands as a 'paradise' and 'heaven on Earth'.

Other themes that were mentioned included the safety and convenience of the islands as a destination – especially for New Zealanders and Australians (14%), the attractions and activities available (10%), food and beverage options (5%), the ease of New Zealand currency and language (5%), the fact that the Cook Islands are not too touristy or over-commercialized (5%), the affordability of the holiday (4%), the islands being a family-friendly destination (4%), the Cook Islands culture (3%), good value for money (3%), high level of service (2%), and the choice of accommodation available (2%).

Comments on why visitors would recommend the Cook Islands to others included:

*"Once again, we really did love the Cook Islands and know that others would also enjoy the serenity and genuine welcome that we experienced."*

*"Paradise sea & beaches. Friendly people amazing culture. Just an awesome relaxing place to recharge batteries or get stuck into trekking/hiking or water sport it's got it all."*

*"Wide range of accommodation to cater for every budget. Easy to get around the island. Nice choice of places to eat in the evenings. Beautiful beaches. Made to feel welcome by the locals."*

*"Winter break from NZ-short flight. Chilled island life. Snorkelling & whales & beaches & fishing. Able to cycle round whole island."*

*"Again a beautiful place perfect for relaxing and easy in terms of currency and language."*

*"We are recommending Cook Islands to everyone, some friends have already visited. Great holiday destination."*

*"Affordable tropical holiday which is easy for Kiwis."*

*"Our resort was ideal for any age group, from a couple to groups and families, everyone was catered for and everyone agreed that it was an ideal base, the amenities available covered every requirement needed. Everyone from little ones to we oldies was catered and well looked after."*

Only 1% of visitors would not recommend the Cook Islands to others and this is largely based on the high prices.

## Final observations

This report shows that the Cook Islands tourism industry generally performed well during the July to September 2015 period. Visitor satisfaction levels and the desire for return visitation have remained very high, and it is clear that the destination is making a generally positive impression on visitors. Visitor yield has increased significantly during this quarter and it will be important to see if this trend is sustained for the rest of the year. The increase in yield is largely accounted for by increased accommodation spend and may reflect high occupancy during the Te Maeva Nui celebrations. The increase may also be a broader reflection of an upturn in visitor spend in New Zealand. Te Maeva Nui itself was also shown to have an impact on visitor spend – accounting for 2% of arrivals during the period and being attended by 16% of all visitors. The average attendee spent significant amounts in association with the event.

Despite the growth in visitor spend this report again highlights that there is room to enhance the visitor experience and to increase the economic yield and broader community benefits associated with tourism. As with previous reports, this quarter's research highlights issues around environmental degradation and infrastructure provision that should be monitored and managed carefully. There are also some concerns from visitors around the value for money/quality of service provided by accommodation and food/beverage operations that need to be addressed. It is not only about poor customer service levels but there appears to be almost a degree of ambivalence or even animosity towards 'visitors' creeping in based on comments from visitors who expect a 'friendlier welcome' from the people. The on-going concerns around stray dogs should also be noted. The concerns over the coral should be noted as well as an increasing number of visitors worried the degradation of the environment because of the tourist activities.

Overall the Cook Islands tourism sector is performing well in terms of visitor satisfaction but it remains important to look at ways to increase visitor yield in a sustainable manner. It is critical to find ways to build on and develop the visitor experience in a manner that enhances local economic linkages. By developing new product offerings, and more importantly, enhancing the quality and 'value added' of existing activities and experiences, the tourism industry can increase visitor satisfaction, and enhance the generation of local economic benefits. The 2015/16 annual report will review this theme in more depth.

## Appendix – Cook Islands Visitor Survey



### Cook Islands Visitor Survey

#### Information for Participants

Kia Orana and warm Pacific greetings to you. As a recent visitor to the Cook Islands, we invite you to participate in research designed to improve the visitor experience as well as support us to make good decisions for tourism in our beautiful island nation. The research is funded by the Cook Islands Tourism Corporation and conducted by the New Zealand Tourism Research Institute at AUT University, Auckland, New Zealand.

If you are a permanent Cook Island resident, thank you for your interest but this Survey is focused on non-resident visitors to the Islands.

**We would like to know about your most recent visit to the Cook Islands and ask you to complete this Visitor Survey within two weeks of your trip if possible.**

Participation is entirely voluntary. To participate in this research, simply click on the button below. The Survey asks a number of questions where you select your answer from a range of options given. Some questions ask you to type your comments in your own words into the box provided. We would appreciate it if you could fill this survey out as accurately as possible. All questions are optional. The survey will run until the end of December 2013.

This survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

All answers are confidential and can in no way be linked to your personal details. By taking the survey you are giving consent to be part of this research.

[Take the survey](#)

Aggregated results of this research may be used in journal and conference publications. A summary of the results of this research will also be available on [www.nztri.org](http://www.nztri.org) in late 2013.

For further information about this research contact:

Project Coordinator: Carolyn Deuchar, New Zealand Tourism Research Institute, AUT University: email [carolyn.deuchar@aut.ac.nz](mailto:carolyn.deuchar@aut.ac.nz), phone 09 921 9999 ext 8892

Team Leader: Professor Simon Milne: New Zealand Tourism Research Institute, AUT University: email [simon.milne@aut.ac.nz](mailto:simon.milne@aut.ac.nz), phone 09 921 9245

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 13 December 2011. AUTEK Reference Number 11/335.



## ABOUT YOUR VISIT:

This survey is about your most recently completed visit to the Cook Islands. We would ask you to complete this survey within two weeks of your return home if possible.

(If you are a permanent Cook Islands' resident, thank you for your interest but this survey is focused on non-resident visitors to the Cook Islands)

By completing the survey you are giving consent to participate in this research.

1. When did you arrive in the Cook Islands on your most recent visit? (format dd/mm/yyyy, e.g. 26/06/2015)

2. How many nights did you spend in the Cook Islands on your most recent visit?

3. What was the main purpose of your visit?

- Holiday (1)
- Wedding party (2)
- Business or conference (3)
- Visiting friends or relatives (4)
- Honeymoon (5)
- Te Maeva Nui 2015 (50th Constitution Celebrations) (12)
- Special event - sporting (6)
- Special event - cultural (7)
- Volunteering (9)
- Education (8)
- Other reason, please specify (11) \_\_\_\_\_

4. How did you get to the Cook Islands? (tick as many as apply)

- Airline - Air New Zealand (1)
- Airline - Virgin Australia (2)
- Airline - Air Tahiti (3)
- Ferry (4)
- Private charter plane (5)
- Private boat (6)

5. Who were your travelling companions? (tick as many as apply)

- a) No one - I was by myself
- b) Partner / husband / wife
- c) Family member(s)

- d) Friends
- e) Work colleagues
- f) Tour group
- g) Organised group (e.g. school, sports etc)
- h) Wedding party
- i) Other \_\_\_\_\_

6. How many people accompanied you on this trip?

- a) 0 - travelled by myself
- b) 1
- c) 2
- d) 3
- e) 4
- f) 5
- g) 6
- h) 7
- i) 8
- j) 9
- k) 10+

7. How did you find out about the Cook Islands as a destination? (tick as many as apply)

- Previous visits (1)
- Friends/family (2)
- Travel agent/agency brochures (3)
- Social media (Facebook, Twitter etc) (4)
- Television or radio programmes (5)
- Travel books (e.g. Lonely Planet) (10)
- Magazine and newspaper articles (6)
- The official Cook Islands travel website ([cookislands.travel/nz](http://cookislands.travel/nz)) (7)
- General travel websites (e.g. TripAdvisor) (8)
- Other (9) \_\_\_\_\_

8. How important were the following sources of information when planning your trip to the Cook Islands?

Previous visits (1)

Friends/family (2)

Travel agent/travel brochures (3)

Social media (Facebook, Twitter etc) (4)

Television or radio programmes (5)

Travel books (e.g. Lonely Planet) (9)

Magazine and newspaper articles (6)

The official Cook Islands travel website (cookislands.travel/nz) (7)

General travel websites (e.g. Trip Advisor) (8)

9. How did you purchase your travel to the Cook Islands?

- Travel arrangements were made through a travel agent (1)
- I made my own travel arrangement using the Internet (2)
- Travel arrangements were made by a mixture of travel agent and online booking (5)
- Travel arrangements were made by others (business, friends, relatives) (3)
- Other - please specify (4) \_\_\_\_\_

10. Which islands did you visit on this trip? Please provide additional information when prompted on the following page.

- a) Rarotonga
- b) Aitutaki
- c) Atiu
- d) Mangaia
- e) Mauke
- f) Other

11. How many nights did you spend on each island?

- a) Rarotonga
- b) Aitutaki
- c) Atiu
- d) Mangaia
- e) Mauke
- f) Other

12. Please select the accommodation(s) you stayed in the Cook Islands? (Hold down the Ctrl key to choose more than one accommodation)

13. How satisfied were you with the following aspects in terms of your recent visit?

The level of service provided at this accommodation (1)

The quality, availability and maintenance of facilities provided at this accommodation (2)

The overall value for money (3)

14. On your most recent visit to the Cook Islands, please indicate below (on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is 'very dissatisfied' and 5 being 'very satisfied') the activities that you engaged in and how satisfied you were with your experience.

*Water based activities:*

- a) Beaches
- b) Swimming
- c) Snorkelling
- d) Diving
- e) Kayaking
- f) Fishing - Deep Sea
- g) Fishing - Bonefishing
- h) Lagoon Cruise
- i) Ocean Cruise
- j) Whale Watching
- k) Kitesurfing
- l) Stand Up Paddle Boarding

*Cultural interaction:*

- a) Island Night Feast and Show
- b) Meal at a Cook Islands Home
- c) Church on Sunday
- d) Island Celebrations or Events
- e) Tumunu on Atiu
- f) Local Markets
- g) Dance / Language / Art Classes

*Land based activities and Touring:*

- a) Restaurants, Bars and Cafes
- b) Cultural Events
- c) Sporting Events
- d) 4WD Adventures
- e) Cultural Tour
- f) Treks and Trails
- g) Cycling
- h) Sightseeing

- i) Vehicle Rental
- j) Public Transport

*Shopping:*

- a) Pearls
- b) Arts
- c) Crafts
- d) Music
- e) Local Produce e.g Coffee, Coconut Oil etc

Please tell us about any other activities you participated in:

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**SPECIAL EVENTS**

As part of the survey, we are helping the Ministry of Cultural Development to better understand the impact of the Te Maeva Nui 2015 (50th Constitution Celebrations). If you participated, please answer the following questions in this section.

What did you attend in Te Maeva Nui 2015 (50th Constitution Celebrations)? Please select all that apply.

- Float parade (1)
- Cultural performances (2)
- Trade days (3)
- Other, please specify (4) \_\_\_\_\_

Answer If Did you attend Te Maeva Nui 50th National celebration while in the Cook Islands? Yes Is Selected

Q77 Did you make any purchases at the Te Maeva Nui 2015 (50th Constitution Celebrations) this year?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Answer If Did you make any purchase at Te Maeva Nui this year? Yes Is Selected

Q78 How much did you spend at Te Maeva Nui 2015 (50th Constitution Celebrations) (in NZ\$)?

Answer If Did you attend Te Maeva Nui 50th National celebration while in the Cook Islands? Yes Is Selected

Q79 Overall how satisfied were you with your experience of Te Maeva Nui 2015 (50th Constitution Celebrations):

9. On your most recent visit, how satisfied were you with the following (on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is 'very dissatisfied' and 5 being 'very satisfied')?

- a) The information that was available when planning this trip?
- b) The information that was available during this trip?
- c) The cost of accommodation?
- d) The quality of accommodation?
- e) The experience of renting a vehicle?
- f) The experience of using public transport?
- g) The frequency of air transport within the Cook Islands?
- h) The overall level of service in the Cook Islands?
- i) The friendliness of the people in the Cook Islands?

15. What did you find most attractive or appealing about the Cook Islands on your most recent visit?

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16. What did you find least attractive or appealing about the Cook Islands on your most recent visit?

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17. Is there anything that could have improved your visit to the Cook Islands?

- a) No
- b) Yes

## **EXPENDITURE**

Information on how much money you spent during your visit helps the planning and development of the Cook Islands economy.

We would appreciate it if you could fill out this section as accurately as possible.

18. In the expenditure estimates you will provide below, how many people are included (including yourself)?

- a) Adults
- b) Children (0- 16 years old)

18.1 Please indicate below the total value of what you paid prior to your arrival to the Cook Islands (including purchases made via travel agents or the internet), in the currency specified below:

- a) NZD
- b) AUD
- c) GBP
- d) USD
- e) EUR
- f) CAD
- g) Other - please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

18.2 What does this amount above include? (tick as many as apply)

- a) International flights
- b) Accommodation
- c) Meals
- d) Domestic transport
- e) Activities
- f) Other

19.1 After you arrived in the Cook Islands, how much do you estimate that you spent in each island (Rarotonga, Aitutaki and Other island(s)) in local currency (NZ\$)?

- a) Accommodation
- b) Restaurants, Cafes & Bars
- c) Vehicle Rental
- d) Petrol
- e) Domestic flights
- f) Public transport
- g) Cruising
- h) Groceries
- i) Shopping (e.g. souvenirs, clothes)
- j) Activities (e.g. water sports, sightseeing)
- k) Internet cost
- l) Other

20. Was your recent visit to the Cook Islands part of a bigger trip?

- a) Yes

b) No

21. Would you return to the Cook Islands? Why?

a) Yes

b) No

If yes, would you include the following outer islands? (tick as many as apply)

Aitutaki (1)

Atiu (2)

Mangaia (3)

Mauke (4)

Other (5) \_\_\_\_\_

22. Would you recommend the Cook Islands to others? Why?

a) Yes

b) No

23. How satisfied were you with your overall experience of the Cook Islands (on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is 'very dissatisfied and 5 being 'very satisfied')?

24. Please add any comments you would like to make about your overall experience of the Cook Islands.

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## **ABOUT YOU**

25. How many times have you been to the Cook Islands prior to your most recent visit?

26. Your age group:

a) 18-29

b) 30-39

c) 40-49

d) 50-59

e) 60-69

f) 70+

27. Your gender:

a) Female



b) Male

28. What is your highest qualification?

- a) No formal qualification
- b) High school qualification
- c) Tertiary/University qualification
- d) Other

28.1 What is your approximate annual household income in your home currency? Please use the following format: e.g. 50,000 and specify currency in question below:

- a) NZD
- b) AUD
- c) GBP
- d) USD
- e) EUR
- f) CAD
- g) Other - please specify

29. Where do you live? (Please select from list of all countries)

*Survey Powered By Qualtrics*